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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JULY, 1973
VOL. 33, NO. 2

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

SNATCH A DEAD MAN

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Silent, unseeing, he rode beside Mike Shayne through the hostile Miami night. He was Shayne's one perfect shield against Murder. Or he would have been—except that he was obviously quite thoroughly dead!

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Complete

THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

Wary, silent, they drove through the hostile night, a red-headed dick named Mike Shayne and the one man who might have saved him from getting killed—except for the fact that he had already been a corpse for weeks!

by BRETT HALLIDAY

THE CASE WAS closed, money in the bank. It was a good feeling.

Michael Shayne wore a wide grin as he slapped Benjamin Ames, his Chicago contact, on the back and watched Ames leg it toward the huge jet plane. Ames had brought the case to the Miami private detective. Ames had needed help, desperately. Shayne had accomodated, and he now was $2,000 richer.

He also had his first solid hot meal in days waiting for him in his secretary's apartment. Lucy Hamilton had promised it to him.

Shayne laughed low in his throat and strode out, a hulking figure with keen gray eyes, rugged features, and an air of purpose that made clusters of travelers part as if on silent command as his long strides moved through the terminal. Outside it continued to drizzle. The drizzle was little more than a mist, but it kept the early Miami evening soaked.

Shayne laughed again as he moved quickly toward the convertible. On occasion he liked a wet night. Especially one that promised the best cognac, good food, soft taped music, and a sometimes mischievous, sometimes deadly serious brownette with a twinkle in her eye and a flash in her smile.

He was forced to brake the powerful convertible slightly as

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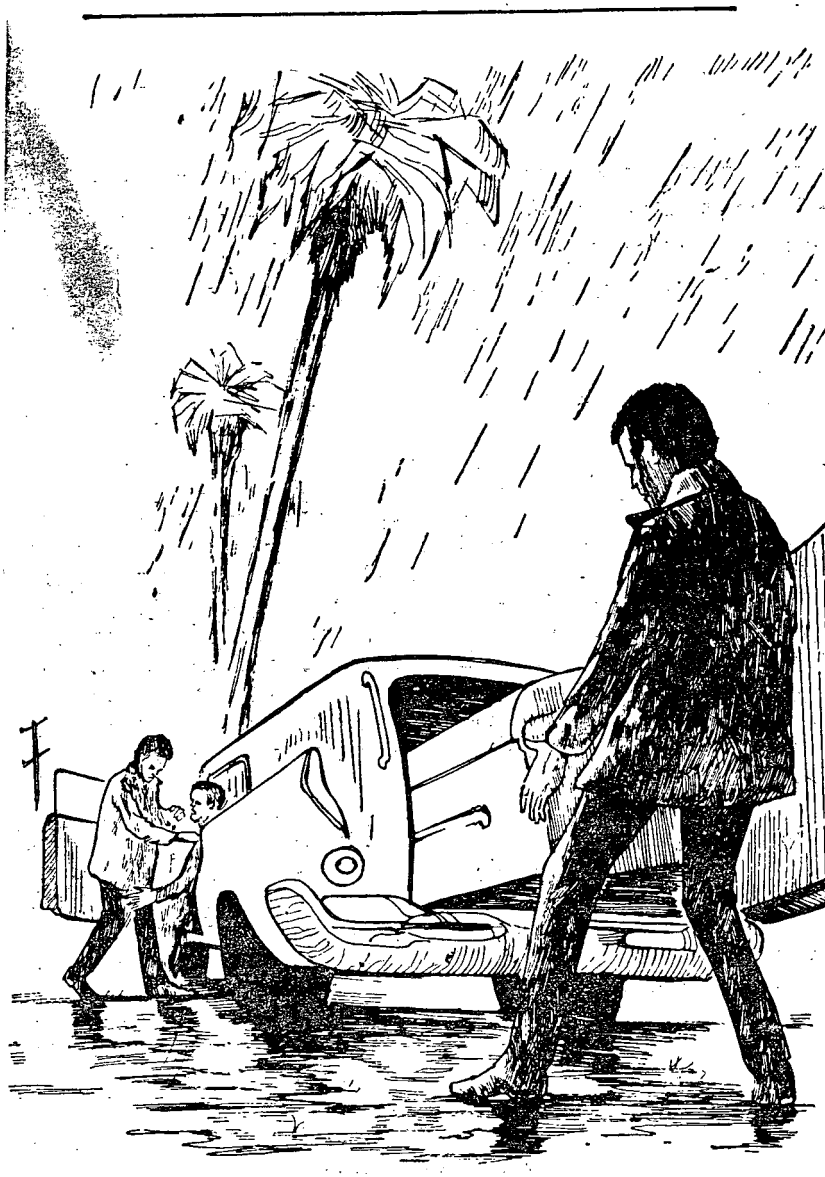
SNATCH A DEAD MAN . . .



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a dark hearse eased on to the airport exit road ahead of him. Briefly he thought about throwing power to the convertible but the hearse moved out and settled into a fast-enough, safe pace for a rainy night.

The hearse turned onto LeJeune Road. Shayne cruised, keeping the twin tail lights far enough ahead so that a sudden stop would not result in a smashed front end. But the man driving behind him obviously did not give a damn about a smashed radiator. He was riding close, headlights too bright, those lights occasionally dancing out, as if the driver was going to pass the convertible, then dodging back, as if the driver had had a quick change of mind.

The driver irritated Shayne. He scowled, slowed, putting more distance between himself and the hearse as he waited for the driver behind to pass. The headlights in the mirror hung tight.

The redhead lifted his foot from the accelerator, allowed the convertible to coast. The headlights hung for a few more seconds and then suddenly rolled up beside him. A sedan flashed past, continued on down LeJeune, riding the left lane and casting a thin sheet of spray that smeared against the convertible windshield.

Shayne turned his wipers to high speed. As the windshield cleared he saw that the sedan already had moved up beside the hearse. It dipped in toward the hearse and then straightened, and Shayne was instantly alert. The driver of the sedan seemed to be losing control.

The sedan dipped again and this time the hearse gave it the roadway. Red taillights of the hearse flashed brightly. Shayne yelled as the sedan and the hearse touched metal. He saw the back end of the hearse begin to sway dangerously but the sedan didn't give an inch. It kept edging the hearse into the curbing.

Suddenly the hearse went over the curbing and nosed into a large palm tree. Its rear end came up. Shayne stomped reflexively on his brake as the wheels of the hearse left the ground. Then he became too busy to worry about the hearse.

He caught the convertible in a half skid, spun the steering wheel so that the nose of the car went into the slide. He rode the skid. The braked sedan loomed before him. Three guys had peeled out of the sedan and were racing toward the hearse.

Shayne glanced in his rear view mirror. No headlights immediately behind him. He jammed the brake and spun the wheel, purposely putting the

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convertible into the spin again. He figured it was the only way he'd miss the sedan.

The back end came around. Shayne gripped the steering wheel hard, grimacing as he waited for the right second to bring the car out of the spin. That second eluded him. The rear end of the convertible came on around and a wheel slammed against the curbing. The jolt brought an oath from the redhead. But there was no explosion of a blowout.

He was stopped, the motor still purring. He growled and rolled from the seat. The sight down the street stopped him in his tracks. Vision was distorted by darkness and the drizzle, but he knew what he was seeing. The only trouble was, he had difficulty believing.

One of the three men from the sedan brought something in his hand down hard on the skull of the hearse driver. The driver hit the street.

Another member of the trio had reached inside the open front door of the hearse and had captured the driver's companion. He yanked the prone man halfway off the seat, then brought his knee up hard into the man's face. The man went limp and the goon left him draped half in and half out of the hearse.

The third member of the trio had disappeared into the rear of the hearse. When he reappeared, he was dragging a corpse.

Shayne shouted and broke into a run. But the movement of one of the goons triggered warning bells inside his skull. He saw the guy swing out from the others and bring up his arm. The redhead launched himself in a flat racing dive as the gun in the goon's hand roared. Shayne felt his hat whipped from his head.

He slammed into the wet pavement and skidded on his chest. Rolling, he pawed for the .45 snug in its shoulder rig against his left side. He rolled again and came up with the .45. The three goons were stuffing the corpse into the rear seat of the sedan.

Shayne triggered a shot. One of the trio howled and spun away from his companions. Then a slug bounced in front of the detective's nose and whined across his ear. When he looked up again, the wounded man was being jammed into the rear seat of the sedan too.

Another slug whistled low over Shayne, forcing him to tuck his jaw. He heard tires howl a tortured song. The sedan was moving when he sighted it a second time. He put a slug in the back of the sedan but the car kept rolling.

There was confusion all

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around him. Headlights of stopped cars splashed, the wet street glistened, there were shouts, muttered oaths, the sound of running feet slapping against pavement.

And soon there would be screaming sirens and whirling red lights.

Shayne found his hat, bolted to the convertible and put it through a skidding, tire-protesting U-turn. The tail lights of the sedan were far down LeJeune now and growing smaller fast. He tromped on the accelerator and the convertible responded by seeming to leap a few yards and then settling into gathering speed.

The sedan whipped up on to South Dixie Highway. Shayne curled after it. He saw his speedometer needle roll up to 100 mph, edge beyond, but he didn't seem to be gaining on the sedan. He put more pressure on the accelerator. The drizzle had turned to light rain. They were catching up with the back end of the storm that had passed over the city an hour earlier, and now the combination of the rain and the speed forced the detective to hunch low over the steering wheel and squint.

Shayne caught the City Limits sign as he flashed past. It registered. They were out of the city now, the lights of Miami fading fast behind him. They were out where there was some open space and the traffic had thinned considerably. The detective glanced at his gas gauge. He had enough gas to chase the sedan a hundred miles if necessary.

When Shayne looked ahead again, he saw the lights of the sedan ease off to the right and suddenly disappear. For an instant he thought the sedan had left the highway; then he realized the driver had curled onto an incline that dropped to an access road.

He eased up on the accelerator and concentrated on flying down the incline. The convertible took the drop smoothly. Suddenly he hit the brake in surprise. Up ahead, the tail lights of the sedan loomed much larger.

A crackling sound over his head made Shayne duck. Rain abruptly splattered him. He glanced up with an oath. The top of the convertible had been ripped, was continuing to split with a crackling sound all the way to the back window. He saw a spit of fire come from the sedan and the convertible window on the passenger side immediately shattered.

Shayne knew now why he was gaining rapidly on the sedan. The goons wanted him close. The first slug had ripped the convertible top, the second

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had shattered half the windshield.

The detective jammed a thumb against a dash button and the window at his side rolled down. Grabbing the .45, he poked his arm out the opening. The gun in his left hand was an awkward feeling, but he squeezed the trigger repeatedly.

The sedan began to sway crazily. Shayne threw the gun on the seat and concentrated on braking the convertible through the long skid as he attempted to keep the dark car ahead of him.

But the sedan abruptly pitched off the access road. Shayne saw it leave the ground briefly and nose back into earth as he slid past it, still moving fast. He rode the slide, finally regained control of the car, and eased it off the road onto a soggy ditch shoulder.

Rolling from the car seat, he went down on his palms against the road. He reached back across the seat and snapped up the .45. Then he wriggled in under the convertible and leveled the gun back toward the headlights that now were cocked skyward from the tilted sedan.

There was no movement back there.

He waited, breathing harshly, his chest heaving, feeling squashed in the flat space. Rain pelted the pavement. Still no movement at the sedan. Shayne wiggled on elbows and knees from under the convertible and dashed to the opposite side of the road. He was away from light reflection now, had stared at the sedan, watching for the smallest flicker of movement, the .45 ready. Behind and above him traffic whisked along the highway, but opposite him silence had settled on the sedan.

He looked up and down the access road. No headlights. And there probably would be none. He knew it was a little used road. He approached the sedan cautiously, .45 leveled, and yanked open the driver's door. The inside light showed him he no longer had trouble.

The driver of the sedan was slumped against the snapped steering wheel, his eyes popped and blood leaking from a corner of his mouth. Part of the steering wheel had penetrated his chest, allowing blood to leak there too. His companion had been pitched forward and his head had gone through the windshield. He seemed propped on jagged glass, his tongue out and his throat gushing. Shayne saw the dropped gun at the man's feet.

The stolen corpse was on the back seat, a young man, maybe thirty, dressed in a blue suit, red necktie, white shirt, gold

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cuff links. The corpse looked very white, very waxy, and very dead.

On the floor beside the corpse was another dead man, spreading blood from a split skull.

Shayne figured it had been one of his .45 slugs that had split that skull. He stuffed the gun into his shoulder rig and frisked the three hoods. He didn't recognize any of them, and he found empty pockets. Scowling, he stood tall again outside the sedan and sucked a long breath of fresh air.

The rain fell steadily, dripped from his hat brim. He felt soggy, bruised, skinned, and out of sorts with the world. He thought about Lucy Hamilton in her cozy apartment, the smell of good food scenting the air. Lucy would be prowling now, perhaps slightly irritated, wondering where he was. And she'd be very pretty in spite of the consternation.

Growling, Shayne reached into the back seat of the sedan and yanked the corpse out. He braced it against his front. The guy was stiff, didn't want to bend. He lugged the corpse to the convertible and managed to fold him into the wet front seat. Then he stood back, scowling heavily.

Who was this dude? What made someone steal him?

Well, he wasn't going to find out standing here in the rain.

He piloted the convertible back toward the city lights, jamming the dead man down on the seat so that he was out of sight. He didn't need some car cop stopping him to ask why he was cruising around with a cadaver as a passenger.

Rain came through the split in the roof, kept him wet. He tried to light a damp cigarette, gave up. Rolling past the City Limits sign, he saw a public pay phone ahead and he debated briefly about calling in a report about the three goons. But they didn't need help. All they needed was to be scraped up. Somebody could do that in the morning. Maybe it wouldn't be raining in the morning.

The rain had eased off to a drizzle again when he reached LeJeune Road. He slowed and looked for the smashed hearse. He didn't find it. Or even an indication that an accident had occurred on LeJeune that night.

He pulled into a curbing, sat drumming fingers against the wet steering wheel, a black scowl drawing the angles of his rugged face down as he realized he didn't know the name of the funeral home that had lost a body.

Finally he snapped the convertible into gear and headed for police headquarters.

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His friend of long-standing, Will Gentry, chief of Miami police, was in Washington, testifying about gambling before some Senate subcommittee, but Jeff Collier had been left in charge. And the large Negro would listen, take the corpse, find the funeral home that had lost it.

Except . . .

When Shayne reached police headquarters, he found that someone had pitched a bomb inside the front door.

The bomb had exploded.

II

NO ONE had the time or the inclination to talk to Mike Shayne. Police headquarters was in a turmoil. Two uniformed cops had been killed and three detectives had been injured in the blast. A soggy and irritated hulk of a private detective who claimed to have a stolen corpse in the front seat of his car was a nothing right then.

Shayne pushed through the debris, looking for Jeff Collier, the black man Gentry had personally tabbed to be an assistant chief of police was not to be found. Shayne finally spotted Sergeant Piper, who had been in charge of the Missing Persons Bureau for twenty years.

"Hey, Piper, hold it!"

"Get out of here, Mike. Can't you see we've got enough trouble?"

"Piper, I've got a corpse outside. Where's Collier?"

"On his way in. Man, he doesn't sleep here! Now bug, Mike. We've got problems as you can plainly see. You got a stiff, go bury it!"

"Piper, I'm serious. Nobody's called in about a missing dead guy?"

"Hey, pal, I'm in charge of finding live stiffs!"

Piper stomped off. Shayne stared after him, eyes hard, jaw jutting. Piper disappeared around a corner. Shayne whirled, saw a detective he knew.

"Reynolds!"

Reynolds ignored him, picked his way through the bombed front door and went outside to the drizzle.

"Mike?"

Shayne turned on the familiar voice and saw Tim Rourke approaching from the interior of the building. Rourke was a tall man, almost scarecrow thin, a hardbitten, cynical man who had been the police reporter at the *Miami Daily News* for years. There were not many men Shayne considered close, but Rourke was one of them. They'd combined talents to knock heads against crime for what sometimes seemed centuries.

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Rourke stopped a couple of feet from Shayne, his experienced eyes inventorying minutely. "Who stomped on you?"

"Nobody," the detective growled.

"You had a look at yourself in the last five seconds?"

"Tim, I've got a dead guy in the front seat of my car and no one here wants him."

Rourke arched eyebrows. "Interesting."

"I saw him hijacked."

Shayne explained quickly. The reporter yanked at his nose. "Let's have a look at this boy, Mike."

"You can look at him all night, friend—after I roll him in the front door."

"You given any thought to why somebody would snatch a corpse?"

"Not enough to keep him."

"Hijacked cadavers are an every day occurrence, huh?"

Shayne snorted, looked around for a cop who would take a body.

But Rourke pressed, "Come on, Mike. Let's have a look. Maybe I'll recognize the guy."

"Write about a bombing."

"I already have," Rourke said, heading out of the building.

Shayne stared after his friend for a moment, then grumbled resignation. Rourke was waiting for him on the wet sidewalk. They matched strides to the convertible. Rourke inventoried it from the exterior, touched the splintered windshield, fingered the split top. Then he opened the door and stared on the corpse. He stood jackknifed for a long time. Finally he straightened, snapped the door shut.

"I don't know him. I saw you talking to Piper. What did he say?"

"Told me to go jump."

"Well, some funeral home should be squealing like a stuck pig. You didn't get the name of the home, huh?"

"I'm dumping the guy here, Tim."

"I know a guy, Mike, who I think would put him on ice for us."

Shayne gave his friend a sharp glance.

"Gentry is supposed to be leaving Washington tonight. Somebody called him home," Rourke went on. "And you know Gentry will listen to you. How about salting this guy? At least overnight."

Shayne hesitated, then got into the convertible. Anything to be rid of the stiff. Lucy Hamilton was probably pounding her thighs by now, pacing, heels digging.

Rourke squeezed into the back seat and directed Shayne

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into the shank of the city, a sea-oriented district stuffed with warehouses, boat repair shops, self-styled boat captains who hauled northerners on fishing excursions for a buck. It was a dreary, dark end of town, a good area in which to store a cadaver. There was only an occasional parked car and the sidewalks seemed deserted. But Shayne was having second thoughts.

Why hadn't he dumped the stiff at police headquarters as he had threatened?

Rourke said from the back seat, "My friend's got an ice factory. That's it straight ahead, on the corner on the right side."

Shayne braked at the curbing in front of the ice factory and Rourke squeezed out of the car.

"Jerry lives upstairs," the reporter said. "Let me see if I can roust him."

Shayne sat in the car with the stiff, staring on it as he drummed fingers against the steering wheel. Who are you, pal? he wondered again and why would anyone want to steal you, especially at the risk of getting killed? Which they had been.

He grunted and turned his thoughts to the three dead men he had left out along the highway. They hadn't been Miami gunsels. Or if they had been, they were new, three guys who had moved into the city or up in the underworld recently. He knew most of the gunsels in town and those three hadn't been among the acquaintances.

Had they been operating on their own or working for someone? Obviously, they had known where and when the corpse was due to arrive in the city. They'd been waiting at the airport.

But what was the value of the stiff?

Shayne meditatively massaged the lobe of his left ear between right thumb and forefinger.

Rourke came across the sidewalk through the drizzle with a stumpy, wide man at his side. Rourke opened the car door and displayed the corpse for his friend as he said, "Mike, Jerry Smith. Jerry, Mike Shayne. Jerry'll take him, Mike.

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He's a little goosey—about a hundred dollars worth—but he says he's got some large cakes of ice out back we can pack around our boy."

Shayne got out his wallet and fished a hundred dollar bill from it. They spent twenty minutes lifting and heaving and shoving blocks of ice around the dead man. Finally he was packed and out of sight. Shayne stood large and hulking and shivering. "How long you figure he'll keep in there, Smitty?"

"A guy named Birdseye discovered the value of freezing, Mr. Shayne," the stumpy man said sagely as they moved outside to the warmth and drizzle of the night.

Shayne flapped his arms as he savored the warm air. "We may leave him a couple of days."

"No cops coming around?"

"No cops," Shayne said grimly. "They don't even know this dude exists."

"Well, somebody does."

The detective took another hundred dollar bill from his wallet and stuffed it in Jerry Smith's shirt pocket. "You *are* goosey, aren't you, pal?"

"It's the times, Mr. Shayne," Jerry Smith said with a lop-sided grin.

"Mike," Rourke said as the redhead piloted the convertible back toward the downtown lights, "this 'couple of days' bit. That means?"

"It means I've got a two-hundred-buck investment and I'm going to protect it," Shayne growled.

"Beautiful," Rourke said, settling slightly in the seat.

Shayne didn't look at his friend. He knew what he would see if he did. Rourke would be grinning.

Rourke had left his car at police headquarters. Shayne dropped him there. The newspaperman sat half in and half out of the convertible for a moment before he said, "And now?"

"Lucy may still be waiting," the redhead replied.

"Tomorrow?"

"Sooner or later, somebody's got to start yelling about losing a stiff."

Rourke pondered briefly, nodded and left the car seat. "Gentry should be in his office in the morning."

Shayne drove to Biscayne Boulevard and then north to the side street where Lucy Hamilton's apartment was located between the boulevard and the bay.

She snapped open the front door as he kept a thumb on her buzzer. She was as he expected: perky, cute, irritated. But just the sight of her was silent salve for what had turned out to be a

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rough night. So he turned on a huge grin for her as he moved inside.

When he faced her again, the fire in her brown eyes had turned to curiosity and concern as her gaze swept his rumpled and dirty figure. But all she said was, "The meat loaf has kept this long, it'll keep another thirty minutes. Is that time enough for a shower and a cognac?"

III

TUESDAY morning was brilliant. Sun splashed the city, drying it quickly. Afternoon would be steamy again, but the morning exuded a freshness.

Mike Shayne drove to police headquarters in the rented car. He felt revived as he breathed deeply of the salt-tanged air. Lucy had been filled in. When he had arrived at her apartment, she had heard on television about the police station bombing and she'd thought he had been at the station when the bomber had chucked his missile. But now she knew about the hijacked corpse and she had gone to the Flagler Street office to open a new case folder.

The garage boys had been a little less understanding. It was the third time in four months the redhead had brought in the convertible and the garage boys were beginning to wonder if they had enough windshields in stock to keep the detective operating.

Repair men were at work at police headquarters too when Shayne arrived. They were rebuilding the entry. The detective moved through the workers and headed for Will Gentry's office. While driving, he had listened to a radio newscast and had heard an item about three men who had been found dead in a wrecked car. But the newscast had been sketchy.

Gentry was not back in the city. He'd been fogged in in Washington. No one knew when he was going to return. Shayne asked for Jeff Collier and got another shake of the head.

"He's getting some shut-eye, Mike," the detective named Reynolds said. "He was here all night. What's with you? What do you want?"

Shayne thumbed his hat to the back of his head. He saw the suspicion in Reynolds' eyes and the redhead debated. He wanted to ask about a missing corpse. On the other hand, he had a hunch Reynolds nor any of the other cops had heard about the stiff. Reynolds didn't seem to be busy, for one thing. And the other cops still were jabbering about the bomber.

Shayne lighted a cigarette. "I

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heard three guns were found in a smashed car out along South Dixie last night," he said.

"So?" Reynolds said, his suspicions deepening.

"I was wondering about them," Shayne replied with a shrug. "Who are they? The guy on the radio didn't say. Not locals, huh?"

"Don't know. And I still want to know why you're interested, Mike," Reynolds said thoughtfully. He hesitated for a few seconds before he looked Shayne square in the eyes. "You didn't happen to be out around International early last evening, did you?"

Shayne smelled the curve but he decided to play ball with Reynolds for a few moments, to see where it would lead. "As a matter of fact, I was."

"What time was that? Roughly."

"A friend of mine had been in town and—"

"This Benjamin Ames? From Chicago?"

"Yeah, and I took—"

"You and this Ames, you're finished with—"

"Lieutenant, if you'll quit interrupting I'll fill you in. Ben was here looking for a runaway girl. We finally found her dancing naked in a two-bit house. Case closed. Ben went back to Chicago last night. I took him to International to catch the plane. It was an 8:15 flight, and it was on time."

"How'd you come back into the city? What street?"

"LeJeune to the East-West Expressway."

"You took the Expressway, huh?"

"Lieutenant—"

"A hearse hit a palm tree on LeJeune along about 8:30 or so last night," Reynolds cut in. "I thought you might have seen it. But the accident happened south of the Expressway."

"And if I had seen it?" the redhead asked.

Reynolds looked straight at Shayne, remained silent. He seemed to be thinking hard, attempting to fit pieces of a puzzle. The redhead pondered. Should he tell Reynolds about the chase, the corpse he had stashed? There didn't seem to be any logical reason why he should not. On the other hand, if he gave up the corpse to the cops he could kiss two hundred bucks good-bye. The city wasn't going to reimburse him for keeping a stiff overnight for them, but a funeral home might, if for no other reason than silence. Funeral home people probably wouldn't relish publicity about losing a body. It could be bad for future business.

Reynolds shifted suddenly in his chair, picked up a pencil and

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dropped it on his desk. "Aw, hell, Mike, it's too wild."

"What's too wild?" the rednead snapped, every sense abruptly alert.

Reynolds wore a crooked grin now as he flipped a hand over his hair.

"These three guns," he said. "We figure two of them died in the crackup of their car. But the third guy, the guy in the back seat, well, a slug had opened his skull, and there were several bullet holes in the heap. It looks like these three boys were chased out of town, shot up, and—"

Reynolds let the words hang again as he fiddled with the pencil. Then he shook his head.

"Naw," he said to himself. "Naw, it's just too wild." He looked up, fixed Shayne with a stare. "Mike, I'm trying to put a two and two together. But I keep coming up with six." He hesitated. "Look, the Accident boys got a call to the hearse on LeJeune last night. The driver hit a palm, mashed up his front end a little. He was able to wheel the hearse away under its own power. Still, the Accident boys say some people out there at the wreck site were mumbling about hearing gun shots and seeing a stiff hijacked from the hearse.

"The Accident boys jumped on the hearse driver, naturally, but he said the people were crazy, just excited. He didn't hear any gunshots and nobody had stolen a stiff from him.

"To make it short: The Accident boys said the people at the wreck claimed to have seen four guys haul off the corpse, but the hearse driver claimed he hadn't lost a corpse: We checked with the funeral home later, Palm Acres Funeral Home, and they hadn't lost a body.

"But I was thinking—well, you come in here this morning asking about three guns found dead along the road. Maybe those people at Palm Acres lied to us. God only knows why they would lie, but maybe they really did lose a body last night. And maybe those witnesses out at the wreck site were a little mixed up. Maybe they didn't see four guys snatch a body. Maybe they saw three do the snatching and one chasing. LeJeune runs into Dixie. The chase could've gone that way, but—hell, Mike, see? It's sure too wild to think about. Two and two make six. Get the hell out of here. We've got enough problems with a nut bomber."

Shayne stood. He could level with Reynolds, lay it all out. He would with Gentry sooner or later. But maybe, just for the moment, he should find out why a funeral home had lied to

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the cops. Maybe such a discovery could be profitable to a private detective.

He said, "You got your bomber, huh?"

"Yeah, we got him," Reynolds said sourly. "A nut. Just a damned nut who doesn't like cops. He doesn't even have an arrest record."

Shayne drove to International Airport and asked about a corpse that had arrived on a Monday night flight. He didn't get any good answers until he slid a twenty dollar bill under a sheet of paper. A young guy who liked twenties looked in a file. A casket had arrived from Lima, Peru. Destination: Palm Acres Funeral Home, Miami.

"Consignor?" Shayne asked.

The young guy turned on a smirk. "Second looks cost—"

"You want to keep your job or be out in the street?" Shayne growled. "I've already got you hanging, pal. All I've got to do is call a supervisor."

The young guy hurriedly looked in the file again. "Shipped by Eternal Haven, Lima."

Shayne drove to Palm Acres Funeral Home. It was a palatial layout with a long, U-shaped drive out front and a subdued air that reeked of riches taken from the dead. Inside, he got a sleek woman of forty who wore black-rimmed glasses, dark hair in a conservative bun, and a black dress that did subtle justice to a good figure. She also smelled good. Tiptoeing through the caskets, she probably was smooth-flowing sympathy, the detective thought.

"Yes?" she said, posing behind the tiny polished desk.

"Michael Shayne."

She didn't flicker a muscle. "Yes?"

"I'm looking for a body."

She poised a new, needle-sharp pencil over a new, small pad of yellow paper. "The name of the deceased?"

"I don't know his name."

The new pencil dropped slightly and a penciled eyebrow went up, appearing over the black rim of the glasses.

"You people lost a stiff last night," Shayne said bluntly. "I've got it."

The polished woman winced slightly. Then a shudder ran through her entire body and she popped to her feet. Composure and efficiency were gone. Eyes darted. She looked as if she might like to run. Anywhere.

The redhead turned on a crooked grin. "Maybe you'd better give me a head man, honey."

She produced an enormously fat man in his fifties who said his name was Forrest DuPree, a

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powdered and slick man who wore a worried look in spite of the slickness.

"Last night you people lost a stiff."

DuPree was aghast. "I beg your pardon."

"A body came in to International," Shayne said. "It was picked up by some of your people."

"Yes," DuPree nodded.

"Your hearse was involved in an accident coming here from the airport."

"Yes, there was an accident, but—"

"Three guys heisted the stiff."

DuPree took a few seconds to adjust his vest. Then he turned on an expression of pained patience. "Mr. Shayne, I sincerely wish I could help you but—"

"I've got your corpse," Shayne broke in.

DuPree's fat lips twitched and his eyes took on a sudden gleam, but he remained silent as he fiddled with the vest.

"And I'll deliver it for a price."

DuPree said, "I do believe, my dear man, that I must call the police."

"Okay."

DuPree frowned.

Shayne turned to the desk, snatched up the phone receiver, began to dial.

DuPree said sharply, "What are you doing?"

"Calling the cops. I know the number."

"Fine."

Shayne did not dial the last digit. He had expected DuPree to make a move, snap a finger down on the receiver button, break the connection. But DuPree seemed to be waiting. He looked upset, but he appeared content to allow the call to be completed.

Shayne put the phone together. The ploy hadn't worked. And he didn't need cops. Not yet. He'd take Will Gentry when Gentry got back in town. Until then . . .

DuPree stared at him, then turned on an expression that very closely resembled a smirk. He said, "Please go, Mr. Shayne."

His tone had softened. He looked sympathetic, as if he might be looking on a deceased.

Shayne walked out of the funeral home. No one accompanied or trailed him. He knew he had his teeth in something. But what? Why wasn't DuPree admitting to having a corpse stolen?

Maybe if he found the two men who had been transporting the stiff from International to the funeral home, they'd talk. One had been slugged, the other kneed. But what the hell, they

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had to be DuPree boys. Both, Shayne figured, would stand before him with split lips and say they'd fallen against door knobs.

He got into the rented car, rolled, keeping a sharp eye in the rear view mirror, watching for a tail to pop to life. None did and his scowl deepened. He felt frustrated. Maybe he shouldn't wait for Gentry. Maybe he should wheel across town to Jerry Smith's ice factory, collect his stiff and deposit it at the City Morgue, be finished with the whole damn thing, write the two hundred off to a bad decision.

There was still another avenue. . .

IV

MIKE SHAYNE drove into the city's jungle. All of the animals were out. It was early afternoon of a nice day. The sidewalks were busy. Cruising, no one could believe that this was one of Miami's festers. Everything looked calm, reasonably clean. The city sparkled. Rapists, burglars, arsonists, thieves, murderers, informers all lived in other cities. Other cities had problems. Not here.

None of these brightly clothed boys and girls walking and lolling on the sidewalks of the fester area were rapists, burglars, arsonists, thieves, murderers or would know anything about body snatchers.

Yet a corpse had been shipped into the city. The corpse had been snatched from a funeral home by three unnamed gunsels. The funeral home was not admitting the snatch or the loss. The gunsels were dead. Nobody would or could talk. But the gunsels had had a reason for snatching a stiff. And the funeral home had a reason for not admitting to a loss.

The cops had not been officially informed of the snatch. Why wasn't some family screaming? Was there no family to scream, had the stiff been a loner in every sense of the word? Somebody had stolen from somebody. And informers heard about thefts. It wasn't every day that somebody stole a corpse. This, of course, would up the ante of any information but then, what the hell, some types of information was worth more.

Shayne cruised, looking over the brightly clad boys and girls. He was in no particular hurry now. He was looking for the half dozen specials, the professional informers. The cops had their planted people, the Syndicate had theirs, and then there were the self-styled people with big ears. But he

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knew of only six pay-me-cash-now-professionals.

And he also knew that if he cruised long enough, inventoried enough streets he would be spotted. Thus, instead of the seeker, he would become the sought, from someone who had straight information.

Beady found him.

And Beady pleased Shayne. Because Beady was a pro.

It was early evening now. The detective had killed the entire afternoon exploring and allowing himself to be seen, asking a pointed question here and there, giving the word time to sift in and out of crannies. It had been a boring, inactive afternoon, but now it was about to pay off. He pushed change across the bar, and Beady ordered a beer.

"Mike," the toothless, ferret-type man nodded. "How's things?"

"Dead."

Beady grunted a chuckle, drank beer, throwing his head far back, tipping the bottle high with long, gnarled fingers. Once those fingers had been deft, quick as an eyeblink. Once Beady had been an expert pickpocket. Then age and arthritis had set in.

"Yuh gotta look under the surface, Mike. Just because something is dead, that don't make it worthless."

"Tell me."

Beady chuckled again. "Wish I could."

Shayne put a fifty dollar bill on the bar. Beady shot him a glance. Shayne got out another bill, but Beady shook his head. "I ain't got that much, Mike. A kid named Bird, that's all."

The fifty disappeared from the bar into Beady's short pocket.

"A youngster," the informer continued. "A kid coming up. He ain't been hooked to nobody I know of. Just trying to pick up a buck here and there. Kinda on the loose, like you was this afternoon. A kid cruis-

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ing here and there, asking about somebody that's dead. Seems like this dead guy's disappeared. That's a hot one, ain't it? A dead guy disappearing."

"It could be, Beady."

"Yeah, well, like I say, this kid Bird's nosing 'round, wanting to know of anybody has a body for sale."

"And?"

Beady shrugged. "That's it. I told you it wasn't much."

"The kid's unattached?"

"Always has been."

"Has he got ready cash?"

"Doubtful."

"If he hasn't got cash and he isn't working for somebody, how does he buy back a body?"

"He's got a problem, ain't he?"

"He's been hired," Shayne said bluntly.

"It'd figure," Beady agreed.

"You heard of anybody new floating around, trying to make it big? Maybe somebody from out of town?"

"Nope."

"Three guns were hit out along Dixie last night. They weren't locals."

"If you say so, Mike."

Shayne gave the informer a side glance. "You know something about them?"

"Nope," Beady said with a sly grin. "But you do. You said they weren't locals. How'd you know that?"

"One of Gentry's people mentioned it, I think."

Beady grunted. "The cops don't know who they are, but my sources tell me they've come up with a good Denver lead."

Shayne digested the information and then said, "How do I find this kid, Beady?"

The ferret was silent for a few seconds, fiddled with the empty beer bottle, then took one of Shayne's dimes from the bar and went to a phone booth. When he returned, Shayne had a fresh bottle of beer on the bar. Beady drank from it, wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"You got a meet in twenty minutes. You sit in that heap you're driving right where it's parked. Bird says he'll find you."

Shayne sat. He started to light a cigarette, then thought better of the move. He stuffed the cigarette in his shirt pocket, touched the butt of the .45. He grunted, slouched lower behind the steering wheel.

The Miami night was warm, quiet. And the street and sidewalks ahead of him looked peaceful. Wandering people looked relaxed. But they were little more than shadows in the reflections of the neon and the street lamps. They could be simmering, waiting to pounce.

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It was that kind of neighborhood.

The detective thumbed back his hat and kept a sharp eye on the people. He didn't like sitting where he was. For one thing, it was obvious that he was waiting or looking for someone. And that made people on this street nervous. But, more importantly, he could be an easy target, a pigeon with his head outlined against the street light.

He shifted in the seat and a voice at his open window said, "Just sit calm."

Shayne froze, the fingers of his right hand curled reflexively as if gripping the butt of the .45. But he already knew one thing: he wasn't going to be gunned down, not at the moment. The owner of the voice wanted something else.

"You're Shayne?"

"I'm Shayne."

The man remained outside the car and slightly behind the detective. "We talk straight, okay?"

"Straight, yeah."

"I'm looking for a missing stiff, and I'm told you might have it."

"Might, if I hear cash numbers."

"Shayne, you go on breathing. That's enough. No questions about how you got the stiff. No hard feelings about three boys who were knocked down."

"Prepared speeches stink."

"Shayne?"

The detective heard the tick. He couldn't see the gun but he knew a muzzle had been tapped against the side of the rent car.

"Consider," said Shayne.

"Consider what?"

"Your boss. What does he want? A stiff shamus, or a stiff shipped in from South America?"

The shadow outside the car shuffled.

"There's a pay phone inside the bar, Bird. I'll take two thousand for the corpse, one for storage expenses, one for having to put up with you, and—well another big one just to make all of this come out in round numbers. Five grand. I think that's round enough. You want to make the call? I'll wait."

"Shayne—"

The redhead started the motor of the rent car. Outside, the shadow danced, then snapped the gun muzzle down on the edge of the open window. "Okay! Hold it!"

Shayne turned off the ignition key.

"Bastard!" Bird hissed.

And then he moved swiftly around the front of the rented car and across the sidewalk, a tall, almost gawky figure who

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stuffed his gun out of sight just before entering the bar.

Shayne waited impatiently, the .45 pushed under his thigh now, the butt near his fingers. Two questions were answered: Bird was a hired man. And the corpse was valuable as hell to somebody.

Bird returned and got into the front seat of the car beside Shayne. "Okay, you get your five in cash. But we dliver the stiff. I go with you."

Shayne grunted. "Did you leave your heater in the bar?"

Bird jumped, snapped his head around. He stared straight into the muzzle of the .45. Shayne grinned. "First class guns who get the drop frisk a man, Rookie. Who's your boss?"

Bird was jerky but he didn't frighten easily.

"Jump," he snarled.

Shayne tapped Bird's nose with the muzzle of the .45.

The kid had guts. He growled, "Hit me and what have you got?"

"All I want is a name, and you can fly, pal."

Bird made an obscene gesture with his finger and clamped his jaws.

Shayne debated. He could open up the kid's nose, spill blood. But where would he be? Bird was tough. He wasn't about to talk.

"Okay," the detective said, reaching inside Bird's coat and snaking out the heater, "tell your man the ante just went up. It's now ten. I'm in the phone book."

He shoved the young hood out of the car and zoomed off. He knew he had stirred hornets. They'd be buzzing his way.

V

MIKE SHAYNE drove to the apartment hotel where he lived. It was almost ten o'clock now. It had been a long afternoon and early evening, and he hadn't eaten. He suddenly was hungry. He'd savor a couple of cognacs, shower, allow a steak taken from the refrigerator to thaw. He had some phone calls to make. He'd bring Lucy up to date and then fill in Rourke. The newspaperman probably was dancing like a puppet by now. Shayne grinned briefly on the thought. Rourke didn't like dangling. The detective turned his thoughts to Will Gentry. He wondered if the police chief was back in the city.

Caught up in his thinking, he rolled down the ramp into the underground garage of the apartment building and into his stall. He locked the sedan, turned and stared at the large man who stood six feet away. The large man wore a dark suit,

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gold colored shoes and held a carbine.

And there was a strong smell of chloroform.

An arm snaked around Shayne from behind and a sponge was slapped against his nose and mouth. He had a brief look at a huge diamond ring and then he doubled forward with a snap, attempting to throw the weight that had slammed against his spine. He already knew the goon with the gun wasn't going to trigger a shot. These boys wanted him alive.

The man on his back should have been a rodeo rider. He stuck. And the sponge remained glued against the detective's face. He drove elbows back and found ribs, but all he got was a deep grunt. He went down, the guy riding him.

Shayne rolled onto his back, the attacker under him. The attacker locked strong thighs around Shayne's middle, hooked his ankles. Shayne sat up, thrashing fiercely, flailing with his long arms. And, for just an instant, a face he recognized was before him, maybe twenty yards deep in the garage. Then the face disappeared behind a row of cars.

But Shayne knew how he had been marked. The face belonged to a two-bitter called Sneaky Pete. And Sneaky Pete would carve out a child's eyes for a quarter.

Shayne concentrated on the hand holding the sponge. He clawed. His attacker yowled. But the guy continued to cling. And then Shayne felt himself pitching over on his nose again. He didn't understand how the guy could have pitched him so easily, but he suddenly was finding relaxation in the chloroform fumes too. He breathed deep, dragging the fumes into his lungs.

After all, it'd been a long day.

He came awake slowly. Everything swirled. And there was a nauseating stench. He rolled, groaned.

The stench was choloroform. He finally recognized it. And slowly memory returned. Two goons, one with a carbine, another with a sponge. Strangers. And the face of Sneaky Pete. Not a stranger.

Shayne struggled up into a sitting position. But all he got was blurred images. He might be staring at a chair, he might not be. Maybe that other lump was a table, maybe not. And that long dark thing, what was that? A couch?

He shook his head savagely but he had to sit for what seemed an eternity waiting for the fog to lift. Gradually, he realized he was sitting on thick,

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pale green carpeting. And then he saw the gold-colored shoes. They were planted far apart and solid on the carpeting, the toes pointed toward him. He followed legs up to a seated man who sat in an expensive leather chair, a carbine across his lap. The man had a wide face, flat nose and dead eyes, but he looked freshly-shaved and manicured.

Shayne swung his eyes to the left, found another man. He was younger, dark hair long, neat in attire and body. He looked athletic, was tanned, and seemed relaxed as he sat with elbows braced against the arms of a leather chair, fingers interlaced and propping his chin. A large diamond ring and two dark eyes gleamed at Shayne.

Neither man said a word.

"Are you with it, Mr. Shayne?"

The voice came from his right and the detective twisted his head. The long dark object wasn't a couch. It was a polished wood desk. And braced against the front of the desk, arms folded across his chest, was a medium-statured man of forty who might have stepped from a *Playboy* fashion ad. Everything about him, including a Van Dyke beard, reeked of modern wealth and comfort.

"Well?" he said. On another night, under different circumstances, his tone might have been considered pleasant.

Shayne shook his head. These boys sending a rookie like Bird out to find a stolen corpse? It didn't figure.

"What does that mean?" asked the man at the desk.

"It means, pal, I'm not with it." Shayne started to get up but a hand slammed against his shoulder from behind and plopped him back against the carpeting.

"Please, Mr. Shayne," said the man at the desk without stirring, "remain as you are. Perhaps the carpeting is not the most comfortable seat in the house, but then I'm in no mood for providing comfort. You say you have in your possession a dead man. I want that dead man, Mr. Shayne."

"I told you that, huh."

The man at the desk sighed. "Nick."

The butt of the carbine sliced in an uppercut against the back of Shayne's skull, triggering flashing lights inside his brain and driving him obliquely forward.

He struggled to remain conscious. He bit down hard on his lower lip, seeking new pain that would dull that in his head. But there was no feeling in his lip and all he was conscious of was the ringing in his ears. Then

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fingers clawed his hair and yanked his head up.

"All you have to do, Mr. Shayne, is take me to the body and there will be no more pain."

The man at the desk was still mouthing the words. He hadn't moved an inch. Surprisingly, Shayne found the man to remain in sharp focus.

"We have all night," the man said. "We have all day tomorrow, the next day, if you wish to prolong this. Nick and Jack don't care. But I do think you're going to get terribly tired of sitting there on that little piece of carpeting. And I know you're going to grow weary of being bruised."

"Okay, so show me my ten grand," Shayne managed to growl.

"I beg your pardon?"

The man at the desk showed his first flicker of emotion. He looked mildly surprised and then he stood straight and shot glances at the two men behind Shayne.

"I told your punk messenger boy ten thousand and I produce. But first you show me cash," Shayne said.

"Ten thousand dollars in cash in exchange for the body is what you're asking?"

"Now who's dilly-dallying, pal?"

"Nick."

The gun butt slammed into Shayne's kidney. He straightened with a grunt. Then he spun on his buttocks and lashed out with an arm. But Nick was nimble. He danced out of the path of the slash, brought the carbine down in a chop against the detective's shoulder. Pain shot like electric currents out through Shayne's body. The carbine came around, grazed his ear. He scrambled with an oath. The toe of a gold shoe came up against his chest, lifted him. He limply pitched forward and his nose crashed into a driving knee.

Then he was down, nose buried in the carpeting, fingers clawing. He was groggy. He wanted air. Fresh air. He sucked harshly. Fresh air would help clear his scrambled brain. But there was none. And he knew there would be none. He re-

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membered that he was in a windowless den.

He was yanked into a sitting position. A flat hand cracked back and forth across his face. He caught the flashes of the diamond ring as his head whipped.

The he suddenly was free again, sitting by himself, no one working on him. But the gold shoes were nearby and when he looked up he saw the diamond ring still within striking distance.

The man at the desk wore a frown now. He tugged at his beard in silent speculation, eyes narrowed down as he stared at something unseen. Finally he said, "I think you are confused, Mr. Shayne. I think you are under the impression that you already have talked to some of my people, been made a cash offer. Neither is true. Who were you dealing with?"

Shayne didn't have the answer to that question. But he had the smell of an answer to something else. It was shaping that this foxy dude and the three gunsels who had died out along South Dixie had not been pals. The three guns and the kid, Bird, were tied, but this foxy dude probably was on one side of a fence with Bird and his boss on the other.

More important, however, Foxy had shown Shayne possessed the stolen corpse. And if he wasn't tied to Bird, it had to mean he'd gotten his information from Palm Acres Funeral Home.

Odd. A funeral home passing along that kind of info.

"Mr. Shayne?" Foxy said politely.

The detective squinted up. He had a bad headache now, and this dude was responsible for it. Shayne wanted to get his fingers in the Van Dyke only once.

"You've obviously made a deal," said Foxy. "With whom?"

The detective clamped his jaws.

"I want names named," said Foxy.

Shayne remained silent.

"I want to know exactly what your deal is. When you are to deliver, and where."

The redhead wished he could work up enough saliva in his cotton-dry mouth to spit.

"Then I want you to take us to the body."

Shayne moved his legs, flexed his fingers. He felt strong in spite of the beating and the chloroform. Anger was pumping life into his muscles. He knew he had been relieved of the .45. These boys weren't rookies. But if he could somehow get his hands on the carbine held by Gold Shoes . . .

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He looked up at Foxy. "Got a cigarette?"

"No."

"I talk better when I smoke."

"Smoke your own. You have cigarettes in your coat pocket."

Shayne got out the crumpled pack, fished out a bent cigarette, stuck it in the corner of his mouth. "Got a light?"

"You have matches too."

The detective got out the book of matches, yanked off a match, lit it—then touched the other matches in the book and pitched the flare at Gold Shoes.

He leaped to his feet and shot from a crouch toward Gold Shoes, who had recoiled. He stiffarmed Gold Shoes' middle, sending the man reeling, the carbine suddenly held high as Gold Shoes stumbled backward off balance.

Gold Shoes tipped against the arm of a leather chair and went down with a yelp. Shayne launched himself in a flat dive and clamped huge hands on the carbine. He brought his knee up hard between Gold Shoes' thighs. Gold Shoes howled and writhed as the detective wrenched the carbine from his grasp.

Shayne whirled into a sitting position, bringing the muzzle of the carbine down, his finger reflexively finding the trigger. Jack, the young hood, was in

Lucy Hamilton

flight, coming down on Shayne in a dive. Shayne flicked the carbine muzzle against the exposed jaw, saw the skin split and blood spurt as Jack tumbled off to one side.

The detective rolled to his feet, went into a spread-legged crouch, the carbine tucked against his body now. He was prepared to pump slugs into Foxy, who surely would be drawing a gun.

But Foxy had disappeared.

Shayne whirled. Gold Shoes was struggling up. The detective slammed the butt of the carbine into Gold Shoes' face, driving him back with a yowl. He saw Jack on one knee and he slashed with the carbine, sending the hood crashing into the front of the desk.

Shayne bolted, he had no intention of sticking around. The odds, three against one, were not conducive to ques-

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tions and answers. Especially with Foxy out of sight and on the loose. Foxy could be off somewhere, gathering an arsenal.

Shayne shot out of the litden into a black hallway. He had no idea where a door to the outside might be, but he savored the darkness. He bolted to his left, his eyes adjusting quickly to the shadows. He spotted a wide entry to his right and curved into it. Heavy, low shadows were scattered. He found a chair, squatted behind it in the blackness. Then, cautiously, he lifted his head and looked around. It suddenly was very still.

He figured he was in a living room. On an opposite wall were what seemed to be drapes. He went to them, parted the material and found french doors. The doors were locked. He fiddled with the handles, snapped a button and the doors opened. Warm night air bathed him.

Shayne ran through the night, the carbine at high port as he angled across what turned out to be a massive front lawn. He spotted a hedge and curved into its shadow. Then he squatted again and looked back on the house. He could not find light.

Suddenly there was action at the house. No light. But he saw three figures dash from the house to the black heap of a car. There was another flurry of quick movement and then the car motor came to life, purred briefly. Headlights popped on and the car moved fast.

Shayne trained the muzzle of the carbine on the moving car, following it down a long curving drive. But he resisted squeezing off a shot. All a shot would get him was a shootout or a chase.

The detective forced himself to wait five minutes before he dug up turf at the base of the hedge with clawed fingers. He buried the carbine. A man with carbine in hand, walking down a street in the middle of the night, could get nothing but trouble or cops. And he had decided he didn't need either. The cops could come later. Will Gentry would be interested in the carbine. He might be able to trace it.

Shayne went through the hedge to the sidewalk and walked. He had no idea where he was. He inventoried minutely. It was a plush neighborhood, out where there was long distance between mansions. And the green things, walls and hedges across the front of the mansions, were plentiful, yards filled with what would be lush palms in daylight.

He finally hit a main

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thoroughfare and he grunted. He suddenly knew where he was. Traffic buzzed, even at midnight. He loped along a sidewalk, found a public phone booth, called a cab. Then he lolled beside the booth, smoking and waiting, headache pounding, but his mind was filled with images of Foxy, Gold Shoes and Jack. Who were they?

When the cab arrived, Shayne gave the driver Tim Rourke's address over near Flamingo Park.

VI

WILL GENTRY was back in town. The Chief was in a sour mood. For one thing, he had found a Senate subcommittee a pain. Washington was a damn good place to be from—a long ways from. For another thing, he didn't like bombers. And for a third, he had listened to Mike Shayne tell a tale about having a stolen cadaver stashed in an ice factory and hoods landing on the private detective from every direction.

Gentry jammed the stub of a black cigar into the corner of his mouth, leaned back in the swivel chair and stared out a window on another brilliant Wednesday Miami morning. Shayne shuffled feet, waited. Across the room Timothy Rourke cocked an eyebrow at the redhead but remained silent. Then Gentry growled, "Let's have it, Mike."

"The stiff is valuable. I don't know why. And a funeral home is playing cute about not losing a corpse out of the back end of its hearse. There's one gang against the other. Each wants the corpse. One has a chief honcho who seems willing to pay for goods received, the other: no pay. I'm saying No Pay is tied to Palm Acres."

"And the stiff came in from Lima, huh?"

Gentry continued to stare on the morning, the cigar stub bobbing in the corner of his mouth. He was a rumpled, bulky man with grizzled eyebrows and blunt features, an incorruptible chief of police who would use all of the help he could get—from any source.

He swung the chair around and stared hard at Shayne, grizzled eyebrows low. "I've got a citizen named Dan Simpson who claims Palm Acres Funeral Home is giving him the run-around. Dan Simpson claims he had a twin brother, Delbert Simpson, who was touring South America and dropped dead of a heart attack four days ago. Delbert died in Lima, according to Dan, who also claims that he made arrangements with Palm Acres

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to have the body brought back to Miami. The problem is Dan hasn't seen Delbert's body and the people at Palm Acres say they never heard of either Simpson."

"When did this live Simpson show?" Shayne asked.

"Early this morning," Gentry growled.

"Where's he been the last couple of nights?"

"Says he went out to Palm Acres Monday night, but was told there had been a delay in the shipment of his brother's body. Says he talked to those people again yesterday and got the same answer. He tried again this morning, same reply. Then he got angry. Things didn't smell right to him, so he came to us. We checked with Palm Acres and got this business about them never having heard of anyone named Dan or Delbert Simpson."

"It's adding up, Will," Shayne said. "Body coming into International from Lima and picked up by a hearse from Palm Acres, then—"

"I want the stiff, Mike."

Shayne shot a glance at Rourke. The newspaperman pushed from the wall and went to Gentry's desk, picked up the phone receiver. "I better call or we might have two stiffs on our hands. My friend Jerry Smith doesn't like surprises, especially cops descending on his place."

"An ice factory!" Gentry snorted, shaking his head.

The cadaver was transferred from the blocks of ice to a slab in the morgue. And two hours later the value of the stiff had been established.

Gentry put the phone together. He looked grim. "That was the morgue. They found a slice across the stiff's chest. He'd been hollowed out. Inside was a large package of cocaine."

Dan Simpson was picked up and taken to the morgue, where he identified his twin brother. He also was enraged but after a long talk with Gentry agreed to delay raising public hell with Palm Acres Funeral Home.

Then a man named Arthur Hodge appeared in Gentry's office. He was a well-constructed man, conservative in dress, manner and voice. He thanked Gentry for calling, then settled in a chair and listened as Gentry and Shayne talked. As the associate director of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, he had learned there were few surprises when it came to moving narcotics into the United States. Cocaine inside a cadaver was novel but did not make Hodge demonstrative. He merely shifted slightly in the chair, uncrossed and recrossed long legs.

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Then he said, "We know cocaine is being produced in hidden laboratories in Chili and Peru, then smuggled into this country. It looks as if we might have funeral homes on each end of the line tied into the operation. I'm guessing these boys Shayne encountered were hijackers. Somebody got wind that a shipment was coming into Miami, found out how it was coming, and attempted to lift it. We'll check out the Simpson brothers, but I think we'll find they had nothing to do with the shipment other than the deceased brother becoming a carrier. Meanwhile, I'd like to have Bird picked up, Gentry. He seems to be the lone link to the hijackers. Shayne, I want you to take me to the mansion where you were worked over. I think we'll find everyone has cleared out, but I want to take a look."

The mansion sparkled in the brilliant sunshine and from the U-shaped driveway the grounds looked freshly manicured. No one was in sight on the grounds and the house had a vacant air about it.

"What do you think, Mike?" Rourke asked from the back seat of Hodge's sedan.

Shayne grunted and rolled from the car seat. He was joined by Hodge and Rourke. No one opened the front door as the detective stood with his thumb jammed against a button. Hodge walked to a corner of the house, looked around it.

"There's french doors down this way."

They moved to the doors. "This is where I broke out last night," Shayne said. He tried the door knob, found that it turned. He pushed the door open and then stood looking at Hodge.

Hodge entered the house and called out. He did not get an answer. They were in a vast living room that was expensively furnished. Shayne guided them back to the den and the first thing he saw as he entered was his hat. It was on the carpeting. He jammed it on his head and stood looking around. They could have left his .45 too. But he didn't spot it.

"This is it, Hodge," Shayne said.

"Let's look around."

"I'll take the second deck," the detective said.

He wandered in and out of bedrooms. Each was spotless. He checked closets and dresser drawers. What he didn't find bothered him and finally he stopped in one of the bedrooms and stood scowling out a window. He had the impression they had invaded a house that had not been occupied for a long time. The only trouble was

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he knew this was the right house. He had his hat.

He went downstairs and found Hodge in the living room.

"Nothing topside," he growled.

Hodge nodded. "Do you have the impression this place has been unoccupied? With the exception of those french doors, I'm running into secured locks everywhere, including the front door."

"If I didn't know better," Shayne said, "I'd say the occupants are off on a long vacation. Those closets upstairs—"

"Mike!"

Rourke's shout from the depth of the house made Shayne whirl. Hodge trailed him. They found Rourke in a vast kitchen. He stood near a hall doorway. The hall went on back into the house.

"Down here," Rourke said, his mouth twisted in a grim line.

The dead man was sprawled on a bed in a large room. Two pillows covered his head, but the blood that had soaked the bed told the story. Shayne carefully lifted one of the pillows and it became obvious how the guy had died. Someone had stuck a gun between the pillows and fired a shot into the man's head, using the top pillow as a muffler.

Shayne lifted the bottom pillow. The dead man's head had been shattered. The detective got down on his knees and squinted. He didn't recognize the man. He shook his head. "He's not one of my boys."

"Then who is he?" Rourke wanted to know.

Shayne stood, yanked at his ear. "Housekeeper, butler, maybe a caretaker. What do you think, Hodge?"

The narc man said, "Could be." He looked around. "And this could be his room." He went to a dresser, picked up a wallet, looked inside. "I.D. for a man named John Martinson. Occupation listed: security."

"He's been dead a while," Shayne said, scowling.

"Leave him," Hodge said. "Let's do some checking with neighbors."

The nearest neighbor lived in a low, sprawling, patioed structure a hundred and fifty yards away. Although the house looked as if it had been put together by a kid playing with blocks, the yard had been laid out by slide rule with a miniature green forest between the two homes.

A sprightly, white-haired man named Lafranc—"Jules Lafranc, gentlemen, film director, retired,"—had put in the forest. "It isn't that I don't like my neighbor," he said with a

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chuckle, "it's just that I once fancied I had a green thumb, but my plantings got away from me. You say you came over here from the Bainbridge place? Is there something wrong over there? Frank and Marie are in Europe, you know, have been for about four months now, but John is on the place, or should be. Didn't you find John? He's been with Bainbridge for years. Good man, John Martinson. Wish I could find someone like him."

"Do you know just where in Europe Mr. and Mrs. Bainbridge might be at the moment, Mr. Lafranc?" Hodge wanted to know.

"Well, not for sure," the white-haired man frowned. "They were to visit their son in Paris and then go on to Switzerland. I think they planned to spend about six weeks with Bob—that's their son—and then go on. I would guess they are in Bern. Why?"

"What is Mr. Bainbridge's occupation?"

"Like me. Retired."

"From what?"

"Lordy, from everything, Mr. Hodge. If you need specifics, go downtown, the Bainbridge Building. They could tell you. He had a hand in a lot of things."

Later, in the car, Shayne said thoughtfully, "Did Martinson

have a piece of the action or was he knocked off for another reason?"

"We'll run him through our files," Hodge said. "He may be just what I'm looking for. Where's this carbine - you buried? I want to run some tests on it."

"And then what?" Shayne wanted to know.

Hodge navigated a green traffic light before shooting the detective a glance. "You're out of this now, Shayne. You, too, Rourke," he added over his shoulder. "We may have stumbled into a big operation. Worldwide. One thing is certain: we've got two factions squared off. And that could mean a ripoff. I don't want outsiders involved."

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Shayne snorted. "And what do you think that was out along South Dixie Monday night?"

Hodge grunted. "Yeah, and there's that," he said, his voice flat, his tone suddenly sharp. "Did you have to kill those people, Shayne?"

"Hey, man, they—"

"They tell me you're pretty free with the use of a gun."

The redhead stared. "What's with you, pal?"

"If I had my way about things, Shayne, guns would not exist. Guns are trouble. Period. And I especially don't like guns in the hands of non-professional law—"

"Catch that empty slot at the curbing up ahead, Hodge," Shayne interrupted angrily.

He left the car, slammed the door and walked off down the sidewalk, his strides long, heels pounding, rugged face drawn down in a black scowl.

Rourke finally caught up with him, grabbed his arm. "Cool it, Mike. The guy pitched you an opinion, that's all."

"Was that what it was?" the detective snapped. He shook off Rourke's hand, waved a long arm at a cruising cab. He piled into the cab and looked outside at his friend. "Coming?"

"Where are you going?"

"Home—to put on my lace underwear!"

Rourke remained standing where he was. "I'll phone you later today, Mike."

Shayne told the cab driver to take him to his Flagler Street office. He had a spare .45 at the office. He'd holster it, might even strap on the holster *over* his coat. The hell with the Hodges of the world.

He didn't make it to the .45. A kid named Bird was waiting for him on the Flagler Street sidewalk. Bird pushed away from the building with a smile. He looked very young in daylight, except for his eyes. His eyes were wary, crafty. Those eyes had seen a lot.

"Shayne," Bird nodded politely.

The detective scowled. Gentry supposedly had a pickup out on this kid. Why hadn't the net closed? Probably because the cops were sniffing around in shadowed alleys and rundown bars, while the guy they wanted was leaning up against a building in sunshine on a Flagler Street sidewalk.

Shayne grinned suddenly. "I'll bet you've come around with my ten, huh, kid?"

"Not quite, Shayne," the youth said, keeping his smile. "But I can lead you to it."

VII

THEY drove to a Holiday Inn. The swarthy man who was

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waiting for them inside a ground floor unit looked forty and was a chain smoker. He smelled hood, borderline between punk and smoothie. What he needed most was a big take to put him on Gold Avenue, make him something to be reckoned with in the underworld.

Shayne liked what he saw. Borderline hoods were eager, took chances.

The redhead said flatly, "Who are you?"

The guy lit a fresh cigarette from a butt in his fingertips. "It doesn't matter."

"I'm the Pope," said Shayne, keeping an eye on Bird who had fitted his shoulder blades against the room door. The detective figured Bird was healed. The nervous man probably was clean; Bird was his gun.

Bird said, "He didn't give me trouble, Mr. Brown."

The nervous man shot the kid a dark glance, then looked at Shayne head-on. "You've given me a headache or two in the last couple of days, shamus. How come you had to poke a beak in something that didn't involve you?"

Shayne made his grin cold and crooked. "Those three boys the other night, they belonged to you, huh?"

The man called Brown puffed hard on the cigarette. "I should let the kid take you out to a graveyard. He don't like you either."

"Birdie?" Shayne said, lifting shaggy eyebrows. He turned the grin on the youth. "You got a beef with me, Birdie?"

The kid attempted to keep his smile, but he had trouble as he shuffled in agitation.

Shayne squared on Brown. "Let's get a couple of things straight. You're a stranger in town. You come in here with three boys who like to play bang-bang. So they end up dead. Tough. No skin off my hide. Then you make a second mistake. You hire yourself a boy who still is wet behind the ears. Bird-boy doesn't know siccum about this town, Brown. If he did, he'd have clued you. Your Uncle Michael Shayne didn't come out of the gate yesterday. You want something from him, you deal direct. Like now. I've got a corpse. You got ten grand cash?"

Brown butted the half-smoked cigarette, lit a fresh one with a match. He was like a spring wound up tight. He wanted to strike out, kill, but he was greedy too.

"Produce," he growled.

"When I see the money."

"You bring the stiff here, shamus, then you get the bundle."

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Shayne attempted to act surprised. "You want me to haul a corpse out here in broad daylight and lug it into this room like it's a suitcase?"

"I don't care how you do it, Shayne, but I see the stiff before you get your green."

"How come this corpse is so valuable?"

"Forget it, man! Deliver!"

"And if I don't?"

"Hit him, Bird! Kill him!"

"Hold it!" Shayne put up a palm as the kid at the door yanked out a .38. "I'll make the call."

"You take Bird, and you go get the stiff," Brown said, shaking his head. "No calls."

"I make a call," Shayne said flatly. "My partner will bring your treasure here. He's tired of sitting up nights with a dead guy anyway; he'll be happy to oblige."

Brown debated.

"Look," Shayne pushed, "you send Bird-boy with me and I'll have him stretched out beside the other stiff in five minutes. I could've had him the other night, I could've had him today. I didn't *have* to come here. I came because I'm not allergic to ten big bills. So I humored your boy. I *let* him bring me. Savvy?"

Brown was having a tough time figuring. He didn't want to believe the savage looking redhead, but it was obvious he had doubts about Bird's capabilities too. "How long will it take your friend to get here?" he asked.

"An hour."

Bird said from the door: "Don't trust him, Mr. Brown. He's got a rep for—"

"Shut up!" Brown glowered. "You got the heat in your hand. What's he gonna do against heat? Okay, Shayne, make your call. And tell your friend to snap his tail."

Shayne turned to the phone, lifted the receiver. But the kid leaped at him, popped a finger down and broke the dial tone.

"*Who* are you calling?" he wanted to know.

Shayne slapped the youth's hand from the phone, dialed Outside. He got a different dial tone, then his big fingers danced nimbly as he called Will Gentry's private number at police headquarters. He sucked a breath. *Come on, Will-boy*, he thought, *just this one time, be there.*

Gentry's growl brought a genuine grin to the detective's mouth.

"Rourke?" he said. "Listen, and listen good. We've got the payoff in sight. But you have to bring the stiff here."

Gentry didn't say anything for a few seconds. Then: "You in a corner, Mike?"

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"I've got some people here who want to buy."

"How many people?"

"Two."

Shayne sensed the movement behind him and he stiffened. Then Brown yanked the phone receiver from his ear and glowered at him. "Cut the chit-chat, shamus. Tell him to get his tail out—"

"He doesn't want to run into an army," Shayne snapped. "My friend's cautious that way. He figures if there's an army here, he might not get his dough. He figures he might get dumped in a ditch instead."

Brown snarled, "Tell him to move it!"

"Roll," Shayne said into the phone. "This is what we've been waiting for, Tim."

"Where?" Gentry snapped.

Shayne gave him the address and then he added, "How long you figure to get here?"

"Thirty minutes. Can you hang on that long?"

"That's what I told these people. An hour. Okay, Tim, snap it. The green is here, but they've got to see the product before they buy. We'll be waiting."

He put the phone together, looked at Brown, who had puffed a cigarette down to the filter tip.

"You play gin?" the redhead asked innocently.

Brown told him to sit on the edge of a bed and shut up. Brown paced and smoked. Bird remained at the door, the .38 in his hand. Bird looked wary. He shuffled a lot and his eyes danced. Shayne wanted to be closer to the youth. He wanted to be within leaping range. Maybe Brown would allow him to pace, too. Later.

Brown stopped pacing and stared at the detective.

"Where the hell did you store a stiff, shamus?"

"In an ice house."

Brown lit a new cigarette and resumed walking. He snapped a drape aside, looked out the window.

Shayne pondered. He wanted Brown to sit down, relax. He didn't want him looking out windows. It was why he had told the nervous man the transportation of the body would take an hour. He wanted Brown to be in a chair, unprepared, when Gentry and his troops moved in.

Shayne said, "Show me the green."

Brown snapped around from the window. He gave the detective a hard look. "In time." He resumed pacing.

Shayne knew. Brown didn't have ten thousand dollars. Brown had planned a rubout. He'd take his stiff and run while Bird did the dirty work.

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Twenty-five minutes had passed when Shayne stood. Bird snapped away from the door, the gun in his hand came up. Brown looked up from lighting a fresh cigarette. "Cool it, Shayne."

"My knees are getting stiff," the redhead growled. He stretched long and hard, exaggerating the action. Then he went to the window, parted the drapes with his hands. He almost grunted his surprise. Gentry was outside. He was getting out of a dusty, unmarked sedan. He was alone. He raised his arms and stretched, acting as he'd just completed a long drive.

"Who's out there?" Brown snapped.

And then Brown made a mistake. He joined Shayne, pushed the drape wider.

"Just some guy checking in next door, I guess," the redhead said.

But Bird was alert. "How come we didn't hear him drive up?"

Shayne grabbed Brown's arm and whirled, spinning the surprised man toward Bird. And he got what he wanted. Bird raised the gun in surprise. The muzzle angled toward the ceiling.

Shayne followed Brown, slamming palms against his chest. Brown crashed into Bird, pinning the youth against the door. Shayne reached up and caught the gun in both hands, twisted viciously. Bird howled and Brown shouted a string of oaths.

Shayne shot a knee into Brown's groin, doubling the man. Then he yanked Bird away from the door, flipped the gun from his fingers and sent him into a headlong dive into the bath. The top of Bird's head crashed into the back of the stool. Shayne kicked Brown in the face and went after the kid. He slammed a heel down on Bird's spine as the youth started to come up. Bird's jaw caught the edge of the stool and he went limp.

Will Gentry said politely from the open front door: "You called, Mike?"

VIII

BROWN wouldn't talk and Bird didn't know anything worthwhile. Brown professed to know his rights and all Bird could tell them was that he had been hired by Brown to find a corpse. Brown was from Denver. Bird knew that much, but he didn't know why a stiff was so important to the Denver man.

Gentry had both hauled downtown by two detectives who had been a part of the

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army the police chief had moved in around the motel. Then Gentry walked out of the motel room and looked in the back seat of the dusty sedan. Mike Shayne saw the corpse and grunted.

"You brought him?"

"How'd I know how far we'd have to go with the play-acting?" Gentry growled.

Shayne grinned suddenly on an idea. "How about keeping it rolling?"

Gentry was instantly suspicious. "Now what?"

"You ready to concede that Brown was the force behind the hijacking?"

"It smells that way at the moment, yeah, but—"

"He tried to hit people at Palm Acres Funeral Home. Somehow, he got wind of the narcotics run. You could talk to him forever and never find out how. Not that it's too important now. The point is, Palm Acres is involved."

"Hodge is working on them. He isn't leaning yet, but he's doing some digging."

"The hell with Hodge."

Gentry gave Shayne a sharp look, then he said mildly, "Yeah, I heard he got under your hide. But the guy is an expert in his field, Mike. For instance, he's already dug deep enough into the Bainbridge corporate structure to discover

that among Bainbridge's many enterprises is a string of funeral homes, located all over the world."

Shayne snapped his fingers in sudden thought.

"That means?" Gentry said sharply.

"Let me haul the corpse out to the funeral home, Will."

"Mike—"

"Let me dump it in their laps, then let's see what kind of reaction we get when they discover the cocaine has disappeared. We could break all of this wide open in a flash."

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Gentry shook his head.

"Crazy," he muttered.

"The promise of delivery worked with Brown. Delivery at Palm Acres, the absence of the narc, could trigger more fireworks."

Gentry hesitated, thinking hard, weighing. Then he said, "Let me get on the phone to Hodge."

"Who needs him?"

"This is federal business, Mike."

Shayne shuffled. "Okay, call him. But let's get rolling while we're still hot."

Gentry re-entered the motel room to use the phone. Shayne found himself alone. He looked at the stiff again, then glanced at the ignition switch of the sedan. No key. He shot a look at the motel room door. It was open, but no Gentry in sight. The detective quickly crossed wires and wheeled away from the motel. In the rear view mirror he saw Will Gentry standing spread-legged in the motel parking area waving his arms wildly.

At Palm Acres, Shayne walked inside, dragging the corpse behind him. He had a large hand fastened in the coat collar of the stiff and he deposited the body on the thick carpeting in front of the desk occupied by the sleek receptionist.

She came apart at the seams, leaped up, black-rimmed glasses flying, and ran from the room.

The fat man, DuPree, heaved into sight. He was wheezing. He stared at the corpse.

"I brought the body you people lost," Shayne said. "He's all yours; no charge."

DuPree gulped and Shayne walked out. Gold Shoes appeared at his side as he moved out the front door. Gold Shoes had a gun in his hand and he jammed the muzzle in Shayne's ribs.

The detective grunted. The stab hadn't been a pleasure tap, but the grunt was one of satisfaction. He'd figured he would be spotted making the entry with the stiff, and he'd figured word would travel as if on a computer circuit throughout Palm Acres.

Gold Shoes took him around a corner to the back of the funeral home. They entered a wide doorway and were in a storage area. Everywhere Shayne looked, he saw caskets on wheels. Then Foxy appeared. He still was dapper, he still had the Van Dyke beard—and he still was angry.

Shayne stopped him. "Bainbridge." It was all he said.

Foxy jerked. His eyes narrowed down.

"How's things in Paris these days? Quiet?"

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Foxy yanked the Van Dyke.

"It has to figure," said the redhead. "Poppa owns funeral homes, son likes to dabble in narc. Poppa may be a whiz in business, but he can't see another little business setup right under his nose. Poppa deals in bodies, son uses bodies. Poppa is on vacation, good time for son to bring a load into Miami—except, this time out, some jerk pulls off a hijacking. And then more problems: a nosey shamus breaks up the hijacking.

"Son is angry, uses Poppa's house, has shamus brought to him. You want to know how I figured that house business, Robert? No forced entry. Son wheels up to front door. Security man surprised, but opens up. Why not? Junior is home. Expect Junior has John Martinson knocked off, then leans on shamus. Son figures he'll get his narc and bolt, always can claim a house burglar hit the security man. How am I doing, Bainbridge?"

"The stuff, Shayne," Robert Bainbridge snarled. "Where is it?"

"Ahh, you found an empty chest."

"Hit him, Nick," Bainbridge snapped.

Shayne dropped to his hands as the gun roared. The slug tore off his hat. He rolled under a casket, came up and shoved the casket. It crashed into Gold Shoes, pinned him against another casket.

Shayne went down again, and a second shot singed his hair. He crawled rapidly. The shot had come from behind him. It meant the other hood had to be back there somewhere. Diamond Ring, the boy with the flashing hand

Shayne scrambled under a casket toward Gold Shoes. Those shoes loomed.

And then a face loomed. Nick had squatted, was aiming the gun. The muzzle was about six inches in front of Shayne's nose. The redhead slammed it aside as the blast of the gun closed his ear.

He swiped with an arm, cut the gold shoes from under Nick. The big man sat hard. Shayne bit his ear and wrenched the gun from his hand. He fired a shot into the fleshy area of Nick's hip. Nick screamed and writhed.

Shayne flipped on his back. Down the line, under a row of caskets, was another set of spread legs. The shoes were black.

Shayne took careful aim and shattered a shin bone. A man crashed down with a howl, and the detective saw the diamond ring.

He leaped to his feet.

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Bainbridge was off to his left, dancing and dodging between caskets, maneuvering toward a narrow doorway. Shayne fired three rapid shots into the door, and Bainbridge suddenly became plastered against the wall beside the entry.

Shayne eased to him, keeping the gun ready. But Bainbridge didn't move. He remained slapped against the wall, his body quivering. Shayne tapped the man's skull with the muzzle of the gun. All he had wanted to do was bring Bainbridge out of his fear, but Bainbridge went down to the floor, where he moaned and squirmed.

Shayne put a foot on the back of the man's neck. It stopped the moaning, but the squirming increased. Shayne reached down, jerked Bainbridge into a sitting position, then looped a hard uppercut against the Van Dyke beard.

Bainbridge crumpled, quiet.

"Peace," said Shayne.

From the outside doorway, Will Gentry grated, "Enough, Mike!"

Shayne whirled. Gentry was moving toward him, face muscles taut. And behind Gentry was an army of men. Including a federal narcotics man named Hodge.

Mike Shayne tossed the gun in his hand to Hodge. "I took it away from a non-professional."

Read: in the AUGUST issue; MIKE SHAYNE'S latest escapade—

THE NOBODY MURDER CASE

A New Complete Short Novel

by BRETT HALLIDAY

There was a stirring in the darkness, and Mike Shayne knew suddenly that he faced perhaps the most dangerous battle in his life. "The killer is here," a voice beside him said. "You will destroy him with your bare hands. If you lose—" Mike Shayne nodded. He knew only too well what she meant.

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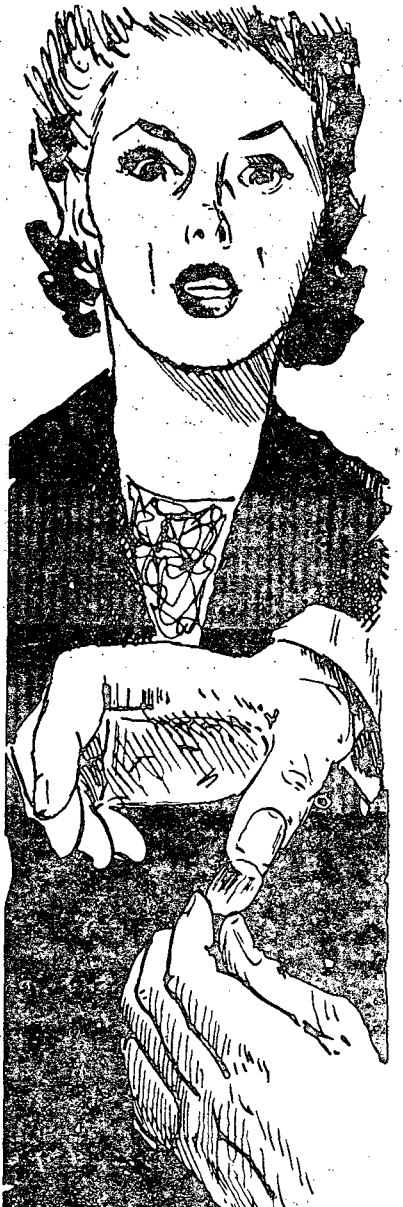
Inside a good man lay dead. Out in the dark Murder waited to strike again. Could I stop it?

BLOODY OASIS

by

JIM DUKE



BEYOND THE neat rows of shiny red apples through the market window, Lt. Dave Quinn gazed at the hell of Purple Avenue. He could smell the dope and brothels and numbers. Nick Rizzo's little corner market had been a clean oasis.

Rizzo had defended his haven for the Purple district's housewives and for the bums with a nickle who wanted an apple without worms in it and wasn't spiked with acid.

Pious Nick Rizzo, defender of the good, a brash and bull-strong man. But not even a bull, the lieutenant thought,

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could sustain a massive skull fracture and survive.

Dave Quinn counted himself among Rizzo's friends. It started when, as a cop on the Purple district beat, Quinn hit the bottle. Heavy. His wife had kicked him over for a thin-blooded man in a safe job.

"Whatdya wanna give up the living, huh, Davey?" Rizzo said, his dark eyes flaring. "You gotta talent in you for being a good cop. Don't can it. We need you."

And finally, with Rizzo's constant prodding, Quinn managed to claw his way back. If he hadn't beaten the bottle entirely, at least he was still a cop.

"We got everything wrapped up, Lieutenant," the sergeant said now.

"Where's Leroy?"

"In the back. Been bawling for an hour."

Quinn watched Nick Rizzo's sheeted body roll out the door on a stretcher and then went through the market to the back room, where Leroy, which is all anyone ever called him, sat like a child banished to the principal's office. He'd worked as Rizzo's handyman for the past six months.

If anything, Leroy was bigger than Nick Rizzo. And he was retarded.

"Who would do this, Mr. Quinn?" the big boy-man asked, his eyes still red from crying.

"I don't know, Leroy."

"When I come in this morning, I knew soon as I saw the alley door open it was going to be bad."

Lighting a cigarette, Quinn glanced around the small storage room. Like Nick Rizzo, it was neat. A curtain drawn across a quarter section separated Rizzo's sleeping quarters. He'd moved in here shortly after his wife died three years ago. Quinn had shared many a cup of tea with Nick Rizzo in this room.

"You here last night, Leroy?"

"No, sir. I did some sweeping and Nick said I should go home and he'd see me in the morning."

"And you didn't touch anything when you came in this morning?"

Leroy shook his head emphatically. "I know better, Mr. Quinn."

"I know you do, Leroy."

Quinn felt sorry for the big man. Like the collector of stray dogs he was, Rizzo had hired him off the street after Leroy tried to lift an apple. And like the stray dog he was, Leroy had been devoted to Nick Rizzo. Now, his benefactor dead, Leroy'd be on the bum again.

That, the lieutenant

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thought, was another mark against the killer.

"You go home, Leroy. There's nothing you can do now."

"Wish I could help," Leroy said hopelessly. "I swear I do." Then his face brightened. "I—I better feed Nick's guppies!"

"Yeah. You feed the fish."

The big man fed the fish and shuffled out the door and Quinn watched him finally disappear down the street, swallowed by the district's daily mob. Shoving his hands deep in his pockets, Quinn was sick of the Purple district. No more Nick Rizzo to offer some redemption. The place was all evil now. He wanted a drink, a good stiff one—or two.

Leaving the Persimmon Bar an hour later, his anger was numbed but not dead. He blinked against the noon sun burning through layers of smog. The Scotch had done something else; it had steeled him for telling Anna.

Brunner's was a shortorder diner on 3rd. It was noted for good cheeseburgers and hard language and it had a solid reputation among the produce truckers. The lieutenant waited for the last of the lunch crowd to leave before he went in and found a corner table. When Anna Falcone saw him, she looked surprised.

"Sit down, Anna," he said.

"The boss don't like me to sit."

"Never mind that."

She sat, and he could see she was running thin after the lunch rush; he thought about waiting until later, but he didn't want her to hear about Nick Rizzo on the streets.

"Anna, sometimes you hate your job?"

She nodded, picking at the sleeve of her blouse.

"Well, times like this I hate mine most of all. Nick's dead, Anna."

Her face lost all its color. He got her some water but she pushed it away and buried her face in her arms. Quinn didn't know what to do then; all he could think was that was the third mark against the killer. Nick and Anna's love, like all things Rizzo got deeply into, built slowly. Nick believed in protocol. Being basically shy with women, he'd had to develop even the courage to ask Anna for a date.

"She's kinda skinny, Davey, but Anna, she's a sweet girl," Nick Rizzo had said.

"Wedding bells?" Quinn had half joked.

Rizzo hadn't said no. But now Anna, hardly a winner with looks, would have to wait many more years, if ever, for her next suitor.

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Quinn wanted to touch her now, but all he could do was curl his hands into fists and say simply: "I'll find the bastard who did it, Anna."

Outside the diner he felt stupid. He'd blown any finesse with Anna. He'd have to make it up to her; Rizzo would like that. And, Quinn thought, maybe Anna would, too. He rolled his tongue around the dry roof of his mouth. It wanted a drink. Instead he went looking for Kippy.

Kippy was short and skinny and he wore a black toupee which looked like a toupee, but you never told Kippy that. He peddled Pete Vorski's numbers and pimped for change, but he stayed out of dope, a good mark, and he knew the noise in the Purple district, which was better.

"You want noise on Rizzo," Kippy said from the cool shadows of a pool room. Hustlers rattled the plastics on felt behind them and a juke box blew hillbilly music.

"I want all your ears working, Kippy," Quinn said.

"The vine noise says it looks like a punk job. Maybe some hype looking for fix change."

Quinn shook his head. "The vine's feeding on rumors. I want good C-note information, Kippy. No rumors, no hunches. Names and addresses."

"You and Rizzo were tight?"

"Yeah."

"O.K. I'll work."

"You do that. And think about Jess Newman."

The little man snorted. "Jess won't like that. Juice peddlers don't like sniffing. They get itchy, get mean."

"That's one reason I want to know where he's curled up. Nick busted his mouth when Jess tried to push some stuff on grade school kids in his market."

Kippy's eyes narrowed. "So you think he—?"

"Right now I'm not thinking much. I'm collecting."

But later in his apartment, a half empty Scotch bottle on the side table, Quinn lay in bed thinking. His brain was screwed up with images, mostly of himself in his peculiar role as avenging angel. It was, he mused as he stared at the ceiling, an odd role for a half dipsy cop.

He was edging up to sleep when the phone rang. He let it ring five times before he decided to answer.

"Kippy here."

Quinn eyed his watch. "It's three in the morning. It better be special."

"You said dig. I dug. Better than a C-note, I figure. But you know my policy—"

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"Yeah, yeah. Pay before say."

"My place. Thirty minutes. Back stairs."

It was a four-story, red brick hotel with a busted elevator and the smell of backed-up toilets. Quinn took periodic breathers at each landing on his way up the narrow rear stairway. But he was still panting pretty good when he rapped on Kippy's door on the fourth floor.

After no answer he removed his .38 from his shoulder holster, stepped beside the door frame, reached out and slowly turned the knob. The door swung open to black, except for the square of dim light on the rug from the neon across the street. Center stage, Kippy lay eagled out staring forever at the ceiling.

The lieutenant grimly noted three stab wounds in the little man's chest.

By the time he'd finished typing his report on Kippy's death, the early morning sun was sending a hard shaft of light through his office window. He jammed the duplicates in the "out" slot, yanked the blinds closed and opened Rizzo's file. Through a curl of smoke from the butt in his mouth, he squinted at the photos of the market interior.

There was the meat cleaver Nick Rizzo's head had been

bashed with hanging on the hook behind the meat counter. Smudged prints. Nick, himself, had fallen where he was hit, in front of his ten-gallon aquarium. The killer had used one of Nick's crowbars from a tool box in an aborted attempt to pry open the cash register. Smudged prints.

He rubbed his eyes wearily. Any other time he would have shoved it into the file marked *Murder Incidental to Burglary*. He was thinking this when he got buzzed.

Captain, Burke, a heavy-set twenty-year cop, sat flipping through the preliminary on Kippy's murder. He frowned when Quinn came into the office.

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"Was Kippy nosing for you?"

The lieutenant nodded.

"You figure a connection?"

"I figure."

"He stumbled onto something on the Rizzo case."

"Kippy phoned me at three this morning, Captain. He only does that when he's got information he knows I'll pay for. He doesn't like sure cash to wait."

Burke tossed the folder on the desk. "Okay. But whoever this killer is, I wouldn't pry unless I had all my senses."

Quinn lit a cigarette with what he thought was a pretty steady hand. "You mean stay off the hooch."

"Exactly."

"Sure."

"I mean it, Quinn. You're a damn fine cop. You know the Purple district like nobody else. But when you belly-up you do stupid things."

"Yes, sir."

As Quinn shut the door behind him, his arid mouth was crying for a drink. But he knew the captain was right. Now that Kippy's ears were permanently out, he would have to get his shoes dirty.

The dirtiest place to start was Jess Newman's, wherever in hell that was.

For the rest of the morning he toured the flop houses, burlesque shops and pool halls. He always seemed a step or two behind Jess. The pusher was like an eel, wriggling into whatever hole needed juice pumps. But shortly after one o'clock he found the current hole.

The Kitty Club was a beer bar on Stockstill Avenue, where they bowled with steel discs and it was a good place to get out of the rain, when it rained. The owner-bartender, fat and sixty, perched on a stool behind his cash register reading a comic magazine. The bar was otherwise empty.

Quinn dropped a twenty on the counter next to the register.

"Jess," he said.

"Through the curtain, first door at the top of the stairs," the fat man said, pulling the twenty out of sight.

And so was Jess Newman. He didn't budge when the lieutenant rocked the door back on its hinges. He just rolled his watery grey eyes and said "Hi, cop."

Pulling up a stool, Quinn sat down beside the dirty-sheeted cot on which the long and lanky man lay.

"How long've you been flying, Jess?"

"A week now, man."

"You've landed once or twice."

"Me?"

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"You came down on Kippy."

Jess grinned, showing his yellow teeth like tombstones in a cave. "Kippy? Kippy who?"

"He was looking for you."

"Yeah? What for, man?"

"I asked him to."

Quinn pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Jess blinked "no" to the offer. After lighting his, Quinn sent smoke at the gaunt face on the cot.

"Man shouldn't play two sides," Newman said. "Man slips off."

"Let's try Nick Rizzo."

"Poor Nick. Heard he bought it all. Very bad, man."

"What happened, Jess? You trip out and need some change? Or maybe you remembered Nick's fist in your teeth."

"That's a bummer, too."

"Where's your knife, Jess?"

Jess Newman blinked. "Lost it—yeah."

Quinn flipped the butt against the wall and yanked Newman up by his dirty collar. After he shook him he patted him down, then rolled him over, lifted the mattress and found nothing. He pulled open drawers, checked the bathroom and under rugs.

Finally back at the cot he stared down at the man. "You're never without that blade, Jess. Now where would a guy keep his toy for—"

Grinning suddenly, Quinn reached toward the pillow. Jess Newman jabbed in his hand quicker and whipped out the six-inch switchblade. The razor edge slashed across Quinn's hand. Still grinning, he stepped back as Newman got off the cot slow like a big cat.

"Yeah, you're in flight, aren't you," Quinn said.

"Nobody take's this man's blade, cop."

"Is that dry blood on it, Jess? Kippy's maybe?"

As Newman's eyes flicked to the blade, Quinn sent his left fist into the lanky man's sharp jaw. Newman dropped like an empty bladder.

While they booked Jess Newman at the station, his eyes floated around in a sick daze. Quinn watched, but he was angry. Assault on a police officer was a long way from Murder One.

"I can maybe understand you sticking Kippy," Quinn said. "Lot's of blood, and you like that. But why didn't you use the blade end of the cleaver on Nick?"

"What's this rap get me?" Newman asked, ignoring Quinn's question.

"You'll be due in a couple of years."

Jess Newman smiled. "On my head I could do that."

"Yeah. On your head. And

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say hello to some of your pals up there, Jess. Of course they're dried out now. I figure they'll want to thank you for bleeding their money for a watered fix or two."

The man's already slack face went slacker.

Quinn felt better as he watched Newman escorted down the corridor toward the lockup. But at the steel-plated door Newman snapped his head around.

"I didn't hit Rizzo! You hear me, Quinn? Chew on that and sleep! I didn't hit him!"

In his office, Quinn dragged thoughtfully on his cigarette and watched the sun through the window burn across the late afternoon. The city lay hot and slumming under it. People were running in dumb circles trying to catch their tails. All but Nick Rizzo. The man who collected stray animals lay on a cold slab with a label on his toe. Leaning back, Quinn picked at the tight bandage on his hand.

The hand hurt, but no more than his dry mouth and his head, but the head was a different hurt. Jess Newman fitted too easy. His denial was too emphatic. But, somehow, he did fit. Kippy had found a part of it. Maybe all of it. Damn the careless idiot!

It was just after four o'clock when Quinn parked in the alley

in front of the door to Leroy's basement room. The big, innocent-looking man sat in a corner of his room looking very much like he hadn't moved for hours. His face was still streaked with dry tear tracks. As he pulled up a wicker chair in front of Leroy, Quinn wondered who those tears were really for.

"Tell me about Tuesday, Leroy. Remember?"

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"Don't like to remember nothing anymore," the big man murmured, shaking his head. His huge hands lay like infielder's mitts on his denim-covered legs.

"Was Nick happy, Tuesday?"

"Nick, he was always happy," Leroy said slowly.

"He say anything about meeting someone?"

"Tuesday?"

"Yeah, Leroy. Remember, he died Tuesday night?"

Leroy began to blubber. "Oh, jeez—"

Quinn pulled his chair up closer. "Tell me how it was when you found him."

"Remembering's hard, Mr. Quinn. Nick, he was good to me. Never had nobody good like that. I don't know what I'm gonna do—"

"The alley door was open."

Leroy shut his eyes. "It—it was, sir. I went in. I found him. Nick's head was—"

The lieutenant waved a futile hand and went over to the small rust-stained sink, rinsed out a plastic cup and grimaced down some bad water. It tasted like dead fish had been rinsed in it. He was looking at the rest of the water when a thread began snaking out in his mind.

Nick's aquarium.

Sitting back down, he looked at the big, retarded man. "You found Nick, Leroy. You got Sampson next door to call us. Then you went back and waited like you should've."

Leroy nodded.

"And Nick never got to feed his guppies. You mean you let Nick's guppies go without food?"

Suddenly Leroy looked hurt. "Sure I fed 'em, Mr. Quinn. I wouldn't let 'em—I mean, I know not to touch any—"

"But just feeding fish, that isn't gonna hurt, huh, Leroy?"

The big man looked relieved. "It seemed all right to do."

"Okay. Now, something else that seemed right? Anything. Straightening up things, just a little. You see, everything was neat, too neat."

Leroy's face went blank, the eyes shut, then the face began to wrinkle up as the thoughts slowly came out inch by inch from the bottom of the retarded brain.

"Tea cups," Leroy said.

"Tea cups?" Quinn said, puzzled.

Leroy nodded. "On—on the table. Pretty tea cups. And the tea in them would stain them if they were left like that. So I washed both, like I knew Nick would want me."

"And that's all?"

After some more thinking, Leroy said: "Yes sir. I didn't do

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wrong, did I? Nick, he saved those for special times. Like when you visited him." He paused. "Or Miss Anna."

The lieutenant slammed the door behind him. The sky was washed in a faded orange with the late afternoon sun slanting through the smog. He cut his car out of the alley onto Purple Avenue, thinking of Nick Rizzo quietly rinsing his tea cups, his special set, for their rare use.

Still, he was not sure. Anna, the way she was, it made him sick to ask her. In the second pawn shop on Jefferson he found the big display of diamond rings in the window.

The owner's name was Green and he looked with disinterest at the badge afixed to Quinn's wallet. "You're not going to ask me to look through all my receipts, are you, Lieutenant?"

"Not unless you got a good memory. Nick Rizzo."

"Oh, certainly! Mr. Rizzo was in here Monday and bought a diamond ring. Like I told that funny little man—"

"Kippy."

"That's the name. Like I told him, I sold it to Mr. Rizzo for two hundred. He was quite happy. Frankly, so was I. I don't often make that kind of sale."

That was Nick, Quinn thought. His fidelity to tradition, to protocol. A proposal of marriage was never to be slighted. It required all the formality, all the special touches. The special tea cups.

Green reached under the glass counter and displayed a diamond ring. "This is it."

Quinn nodded. "You mean like it."

"No, this *is* it. Which is what I told Mr. Kippy. I mean, here I sell Mr. Rizzo the ring on Monday, and a Mr. Smith sells it back to me yesterday."

"Describe Smith."

The description, which fitted Jess Newman, made the tie that Quinn suspected, but as he drove to Brunner's and saw all the pieces swimming in front of him he couldn't set them right. He began to wonder if he wanted to.

The dinner hour crowd jammed all tables and stools in the small cafe as Quinn scanned the place for Anna's thin frame. Finally he grabbed a stout little waitress as she tried to elbow by him.

"Anna. Where is she?"

"Dunno, mister. She's been pretty sick today. While ago, maybe an hour, she was serving coffee to a cop. They talked a little and then the next thing I know she's gone. Now I gotta move, mister."

Quinn went back to see Joe Brunner in the kitchen. He was sweating over the griddle that

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crackled with greasy chops and burgers.

"Anna," Brunner growled. "Left me shorthanded, that broad! Right out the door!" He slammed a plate of steaming pork chops on the steel serving counter. "Listen, some days she'd come in here, Miss Queen herself. But lately she's been tight like a drum. Said I wasn't paying her enough. Man, sixty-five is all I can afford."

"Address?"

"Brookside apartments on Bell Street. Hey, you see her, tell her maybe I can raise her ten."

"She'd still want more," Quinn said.

The ancient globe-like street lamps flickered, then came on full as Quinn parked in front of the two-story apartment building. He found her name on the panel of mail boxes just inside the entrance. Halfway down the hallway he hesitated at her door. His instinct was to knock, but instead he opened it quickly.

The small apartment was a shambles, a pig sty. Wads of paper, soiled bedding and in the bathroom on the floor he found an empty ring container. Newman supplied her and got back at Nick Rizzo that way, he thought. Then, when the cop mentioned Jess was busted, Anna went looking for free Smack. Quinn could see a half-dozen empty heroin bindles, small squares of paper. He kicked the basket, scattering its contents across the floor.

As he went back down the hallway, a door cracked open and a slim, wrinkled face of a woman peered out. "You looking for that Falcone woman, too?"

The lieutenant stopped. "Whatdya mean 'too'?"

"Maybe an hour ago, a big man. I felt sorry for him. I mean he was sort of slow and he was breathing heavy like maybe he'd been running."

"And what'd you tell him?"

"That she got phone calls from the Kitty Bar the last week or so. We only got the hallway phone, and I'd always have to—"

He managed to cut the twenty minute drive to fifteen, but Leroy was on foot and he didn't have the traffic to worry about. When he arrived, the bar was crammed to the walls with its mangy patrons. Quinn elbowed slowly through and at the stairway took it in three steps.

When he threw open the door to Newman's room, Leroy stood in the middle of the floor, staring at the bathroom. Turning slowly to face Quinn, he held out his big hands apologetically.

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At the bathroom doorway Quinn looked in at the skinny woman, still in her waitress uniform, but the uniform was soaked nearly tan with an addict's sweat. He felt her bent neck for a pulse, but there was none. Against the wall above the toilet he could see the damp spot where Leroy had flung her. Her sleeve on her left arm was rolled up, revealing the blood trail from the needle mark.

The basin had the pieces—the spoon, burnt matches and the torn bindle.

The hypo lay crushed on the dirty floor.

"She was bad doing that, wasn't she, Mr. Quinn?" he heard Leroy say from the other room. "Nick, he always said them were the worst people."

Quinn drew the back of his moist hand across his mouth. He glanced around for a bottle, anything with a trace of alcohol in it.

"I kept asking her why, Mr. Quinn. I mean she didn't have to kill him. She said she was sick and needed money and Nick wouldn't give her none. She said Nick called her a junkie and said here he went and bought a ring for a junkie—"

"Yeah, yeah, Leroy," Quinn said. He could see good old pious Nick Rizzo, his black eyes flashing, and then turning his back on the frenzied, sick girl to feed his guppies. And there's that ring in his pocket that can buy her another fix. What's a tap on the head? And while at it, maybe the cash register. But she was too trip-happy to pop it open.

"Those tea cups, they made me think, just like you, huh, Mr. Quinn? And we were right, it was Anna, you know."

Turning slowly, Quinn looked wearily at the big man, and Leroy's eyes suddenly inflated with fear, like an animal that's trapped but doesn't really know why he should feel that way.

"I—I done wrong, huh? You think Nick he'd be mad at me in heaven?" He was backing toward the doorway.

Quinn felt numb as he watched him. Then he heard the heavy footsteps as Leroy ran down the stairs and disappeared into the bar.

He hoped Leroy would keep running until he was out of the Purple district, out of the wormy mess in which Nick had tried to maintain his little oasis, his Eden. Only, finally, Nick's guard dropped. And the district had finally gotten to the Eden, too.

Through its Eve.

The lieutenant went downstairs and found a narrow opening at the bar. He waited patiently for his drink.

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THE CUT-OUT PASTED HEADS

A drab little handmaiden of death, she had been. Now it was her turn to die...

by PAULINE C. SMITH

OF ALL POSSIBLE murder victims, Mary Oliphant was the most unlikely, being submissive, subservient, silent and sluggish. So who would want to kill Mary?

The idea was unthinkable.

However, someone had thought of it.

I was closely questioned by

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the police because it was assumed I probably knew her best. Actually, it turned out that I didn't know her at all—not then, anyway. Not until much later.

She lived two doors from me, and due to the fact that the neighbors between us, a retired couple, were anti-social to the point of hostility, Mary had only one place to go. And that was to my house, where she sat, as imperturbable as a Buddha, hands clasped across her fat in solemn expectation that I would fill up the vast wasteland of her daily life with coffee and conversation. The first she swished around her teeth and tonsils like a mouthwash before swallowing and the second simply lulled her with sound.

She was found in one of the high backed rockers in her phlegmatic little living room, all brown and beige, as impersonal and as passionless as was Mary herself. I knew the rocker, one of a pair, upholstered with tan-colored seat and back pads of an uninspired print. She had been hanged by a piece of cord cut from her own drapery pull, looped around her neck and tied to the high back of the chair.

"What was she like, Mrs. Morton?" the police asked.

What was Mary like? I honestly didn't know.

"Did she have any visitors?"

I shook my head.

"Family? Relatives?"

"Not that I know of," I said.

The officer consulted his notes.

"Yet you knew her two years?" he asked incredulously.

Mary had moved in as quietly unobtrusive as she had lived in that little house these past two years. I'm a friendly, outgoing widow and with that withdrawn couple next door, the self-centered parents beyond and all the others along the block coupled up and off to work, I went over with a pot of coffee and a plate of sandwiches to welcome her.

When you welcome somebody, you question them.

Like: "I'm a widow. I've got one daughter and two grandchildren five hundred miles away that I don't see often enough." Then you pause and expect whoever it is you're questioning to lean forward and say, "*Oh, me too,*" and tell all about their children and grandchildren.

Not so with Mary. She simply said she never lived in any one place for long, which seemed to mean she never lived in any one place long enough to acquire either children or grandchildren. So I talked of Susan and the kids while she listened.

She used to phone me every morning at eight o'clock sharp, always beginning her conversa-

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tion with, "What's doing?" the vague lead-in question that not only relinquishes the burden of conversation but requests a schedule of activity. One of these days, I promised myself, I wouldn't answer that eight o'clock call.

But that first morning the call failed to come, instead of triumph, I felt a sense of guilt because it was not there not to answer.

The second morning of silence I began to feel rejected, so in the early afternoon, I phoned her and received no answer.

That was when I really began to worry. What in the world was wrong with Mary Oliphant? Where in the world could she be? By going to the far rear of my property, I could see over into hers and she certainly wasn't in her back yard; and by going out to my hedge in front I could see into her front yard. She wasn't there.

Mary had no car, and with all of California on wheels, bus service being terrible if at all, the only time Mary went anywhere, she went with me. I'd say, "I have to go to the supermarket," and over she'd come to go along. I'd say, "There are a couple of good garage sales in the east part of town. Want to go along?" She always did and while I picked and pounced, my imagination creatively transforming other people's junk into my very own treasures, Mary placidly followed without interest. "You know what?" I said. "You need a hobby."

"I have a hobby," she answered without expression. What hobby, for heaven's sake, follow-the-leader? I thought she was joking, making fun of herself for being such a dud. But she had a hobby all right, as I learned after her death.

I have never seen such apathy. That's why I was so surprised when I noticed the mailman stuffing all those news magazines in her mailbox each week. Mary Oliphant and the news? The idea was unbelievable. So I sprinkled my monologue with news events, not that I know so much about what's going on except what I read in the local paper and see on Channel 2, but Mary didn't know even that much and cared less.

On the third morning with no call from her, I began to act.

I phoned first, letting it ring eight or ten times before I banged down the receiver and raced out my front door. I flew past the hostile house and tore up Mary's walk and her steps and had my finger on the bell almost before I'd hit the porch. It rang all right. I could hear the double chimes.

Nothing happened.

I tried the door, which was locked tighter than a drum. The

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drapes were closed so I couldn't see inside. Then I remembered the mailbox and leaped off the steps, raced down the walk, opened it up and pulled out what was in there. One news magazine, the light bill and about three pieces of occupant junk mail. Well! I got my light bill two days before, so either Mary was inside that house so sick she couldn't raise her head or she was gone, and where would she go and how?

I shuddered at what I refused to think about, stuffed the mail back in the box and hurried home to call the police. They fed me all the bromides like she's probably gone on a little trip. . *Mary Oliphant?* She's probably visiting someone. . . *Mary? Anyone but me?* Finally I got mad and they got disgusted and came out and got into the house and found her hanged from the back of her rocker.

Who would want to kill Mary Oliphant?

Then came the questions and the raised eyebrows when I admitted I didn't know item one about her, even though I had talked to her or seen her every blessed day of those two years, excepting, of course, for the week last Christmas and the one before that I spent in San Diego with Susan and the kids and the two weeks last summer I was there.

I was very meticulous with the police, wanting to indicate that I was statistically sound, and *no one could learn anything about Mary Oliphant* because either (1) there was nothing to learn, or (2) she wasn't letting anything out. I, naturally, leaned toward (1).

Well, the police did everything that police do at a time like that, I suppose, such as making out reports and taking fingerprints of which there were a lot, all Mary's. They studied the broken lock on the kitchen door, then paced in the back and peered in the front and said it must have been some prowler.

"Anything taken?" they barked at me, asking me to look through all the poor woman's possessions.

"How do I know?" I barked back, having only been in the house once before.

Then they found the safety deposit box down at the bank. Think of it! The many times I'd driven her down to the bank. . . "to cash a little check," she apologized, and there was that safety deposit box with a couple of diamonds in it that would knock your eye out. There were some war bonds—not that she was rolling in wealth, but there was enough to keep her in reasonable comfort until she was eighty, which she would never get to be now, rest her soul. I

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couldn't help but think what a shame it was she hadn't gotten those rockers reupholstered in bright red and had fun buying stuff at garage sales.

Everything would go to the State, the police told me. After a decent interval of time, of course, during which they would bend every effort to find some heirs, which I'm sure they won't do, especially now that I know more than the police.

With everything tied up, like the house furnishings and safety deposit box, it meant the State would have to take care of her funeral and I knew how that would be, so I took care of it.

The whole neighborhood showed up, now that she was a celebrity, kind of, having been murdered and all, including the hostile couple, the parents and all the working couples. And then they forgot Mary. I did not, nor did the police who remembered her in a rigid we-have-our-minds-made-up fashion. What they'd made up their minds to was that the same monster who'd killed those two girls whose bodies were found in the brush, obviously killed Mary in her own house.

They said she'd been sexually molested. *Mary Oliphant?*

"Those two girls," I reminded the police, "were young and pretty and plucked off the freeway when one of their cars

ran out of gas and the other had a flat."

How, I asked the police, could they possibly figure the murderer of two girls flung in the brush as the same one who hanged Mary on a chair-back, execution style? But they said how about the Boston Strangler? He killed all different ages and some he left in absolutely awful positions.

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I looked away. I had read the book.

Anyway, they rounded up all the sex offenders and came up with nothing and asked me, as Mary Oliphant's only friend, to help them gather together her possessions. I suppose they had to get the house emptied and put the stuff somewhere as exhibits. Or to be sold by the State after a properly allotted time.

That's when I riffled through some of those news magazines she had piled up on the floor by a mirrored dressing table in her bedroom.

The magazines went back to the early '50's and seemed to be selected copies. . .twenty five, thirty of them, I thought. In counting them later, I discovered there were thirty-two, the latest issue, the top copy, dated four months previously. I sat there, on Mary's dressing table bench, in front of her dressing table mirror and leafed through that top copy, wondering why she should keep only certain issues of certain magazines over such a long period of time. And there, in the *National News* section, I found the first pasted photographed face.

It was shocking. I stared at it, ran my finger over it, strangely appalled by the sight of this cut-out photographed face pasted over the face already there in the magazine picture. I leafed slowly through the rest of the pages, but that one picture in the *National News* section was the only one altered by a photographic substitution.

I turned the magazine face down and picked up the second one from the pile. There, in the *National News* section again, same photographed face, carefully cut out—I mean, around the chin and the hair. I glanced at the manicure scissors on the dressing table—she'd used those. The face didn't quite fit on the body of the woman in the magazine photo. It wasn't turned correctly for the angle of the shoulders and that made it rather horrible, somehow.

The third magazine. Same thing. A head pasted over another. In each case it had been the same substituted head for the same originally photographed body, in a picture with the same man, so this was not a random game of paper dolls, but a selectively serious study.

Two policement were working in the house, looking through drawers again and packing stuff in boxes to be carted away. This was two months after Mary's murder and a month after her burial. The house had to be cleared out so the owner could rent it again. I grabbed up the three magazines and took them to the policemen, feeling as if I were right on the edge of

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something. I laid the magazines open so they could see what I had to offer.

They looked down at the pictures for a second, then up at me blankly.

"They're Mary's magazines," I explained. "She pasted the heads."

One officer picked up a copy while the other looked over his shoulder.

"Why did she do it?" I cried, my voice rising shrilly. "Who is it? And who did she paste it over?"

One officer shrugged and presented his verdict.

"Psycho," he said to the other, who nodded knowingly. He tossed back the magazine.

"But it might mean something," I attempted to argue.

"What would it mean?"

"That Mary was more than she seemed to be—"

The officer smiled.

"—or knew more and was pointing out her killer either as the man or woman in the picture, or the one whose head is pasted on—"

The officer laughed.

"Well look, then, could I have them?"

"Have what?"

"The magazines," I cried, and together, the officers thought it over briefly, saying why not? They were just magazines. Old issues, and one said to the other, "We catch the guy did those other two killings and we'll have the one did this one."

So I took all the clues home and the movers dragged all the stuff that didn't count out of the house and took it to wherever the police take the stuff of lone murdered people. The police went back to wherever the police go to figure out who killed whom.

Then the owner sold the house Mary Oliphant had lived in to a middle-aged couple.

"I understand there was a murder in it," the new woman told me cheerfully, "and that's the reason we got it at such a bargain. Did you know the woman that was killed?"

I shook my head because, with all those magazines piled in my house, I discovered I hadn't known Mary at all, but I was beginning to find her and once I knew her reason for pasting those pictures over pictures in certain magazines, I was sure I would find her killer.

I missed Mary's morning phone calls now that they no longer came. I missed her personalityless visits. It was when I reached the bottom magazine, dated early in the Fifties that I found, between its pages, the original photo and supply of stamp pictures made from it, also a newsprint copy carefully cut around the edge so that no

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headline, no caption was revealed.

The face in the picture began to look familiar. Was that just because I'd looked at it so often pasted incongruously on other pictured shoulders, or had the features begun to poke and pry at a memory?

They say a whiff of fragrance, a trio of musical notes, a line in a book will jog the memory back to forgotten times, and that is true. This carefully cut news photo of a girl's sweetly empty face topped by a Lily Tomlin telephone routine pompadour, a '40's extravaganza, reminded me of Joe when he leaned close in the smoke-filled room to whisper, "She's jiggled all her brains loose and they're flopping around in that rolled-up hair."

I had giggled in appreciation, not at Joe's limp joke but for the fact that he recognized the prettiness of the jitterbug dancer as being shallow, because I was newly married and scared of any pretty girl in this Navy town of pretty girls.

The face *was* shallow, remindful too. I bent down, remembering San Diego old town in the '40's, tough, vital and bombastic. Navy uniforms. Off-limits nightclubs. My God! The jitterbug was a wild dance and this girl the wildest.

I brought the magnifying glass close so that the face fell apart in newsprint dots and remembered her impossible name, Pansy Field. Flying legs, tapping feet, the rhythmic clap of the audience, Pansy Field. . .

"The one The Congressman's off his nut about," Joe had told me. "He's thinking of marrying her if she can prove she's pure enough for him." I remembered, after not remembering all these years, the commotion over Joe's commanding officer, nick-named "The Congressman" because he was a politician's son and therefore news, as was the fact that he was courting Pansy Field, an off-limits nightclub entertainer.

Now I knew this photograph, the stamp pictures and news photo were all of Pansy Field. What I had to find out was why she was pasted here with The Congressman on the shoulders of the woman he really married.

"She hasn't got a brain in her head," Joe told me and I had pressed my knee close to his under the quarter-sized table, glad I had the brains if not jitterbug prettiness to offer him, and shouted to be heard over the brass and the cymbals, "She doesn't need any. She's doing all right without them." But she had needed brains if this picture of Pansy Field was also the picture of Mary Oliphant and I was sure that it was.

There had been no portraits

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of Mary in her home. None at all. No snapshots in albums. No albums. No memories, unless these news magazines were her memories doctored into wishful thinking. I closed my eyes tight and allowed myself to see the brief shallow beauty of Pansy Field buried beneath the years of Mary Oliphant's purposeful neglect.

That newsprint photo had looked out of the front page of a San Diego paper, and I remembered Joe saying, "Well, this tears it with The Congressman. He can't afford to get tied up with anything that might hurt the future he's got all laid out for himself. . ."

But I don't remember what it was all about or anything of the trial that was to follow because Joe's ship moved out and I refused to read the newspapers filled with war, and was no longer a part of the frenzied crowd trying to forget it in smoky off-limits night clubs watching a crazy jitterbug routine.

After Hiroshima and once Joe was home, we put that time behind us, never talking of the town when we left it or the people we had known there. We never saw the town again until Susan elected to enter the university at San Diego and later married a San Diegan. Then we saw it often, but never any of the people until I saw Pansy Field when Mary Oliphant moved into the house two doors away from me.

So now I would have to go back and read the accounts I had not read then and find out what happened when Mary looked like Pansy.

I phoned Susan and told her I was on my way. I had the car tuned up and packed the thirty-two magazines, the photograph, newspaper copy and the stamp pictures in a suitcase and took off.

Then I spent two weeks in the back rooms of the two leading newspaper offices in San Diego and found out why Mary Oliphant pasted Pansy Field's head on the wife of The Congressman, and the reason for her murder.

"How do you even know this Pansy-Whatever and the woman who was your neighbor are the same?" Susan asked me.

"It was in the paper," I said.

"What was in the paper?"

"Well, she was a witness at the trial."

"*What* trial?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake," I said, "this trial I've been checking back on. Happened in '44, and Pansy Field was a witness. The prosecuting attorney asked her name and she said it was Pansy Field. Then the attorney said, 'Your legal name,

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not your stage name,' and she said it was Mary Oliphant."

"What was she a witness to?" asked Susan.

"Murder," I said.

That was an overstatement actually, made for effect. What she was supposed to be was an alibi witness for the man accused of murder. I tried to describe for Susan what this town was like during the war years, and the little off-limits nightclub where an apartment building now stands.

"Mary Oliphant won a jitterbug contest," I said.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Jitterbug was a dance," I said and showed her a few steps.

"That's weird," she said.

"Well, anyway, she was good at it. And it came out in the trial that she'd won this contest and was hired by these two men to perform in their nightclub."

"What two men?"

"The one who was murdered and the other accused of his murder."

Susan looked confused.

"They were partners," I explained, "and when one of them was killed, in the nightclub after hours, it was naturally assumed that his partner had done it. So they arrested him and he said he couldn't have done it because he was with Pansy Field in her room a block away and she said he wasn't there at all."

"What was he killed with? The man who was killed, I mean."

"A gun."

"Well. How about fingerprints on the gun?"

"It was never found. But the prosecution claimed it could only have been the partner."

"Why?"

"Because of Pansy Field. She was supposed to have been—well, have been their you-know-what."

"No. What?" said Susan wickedly. She is very well aware that I am of the old school and can't say things right out like young people can.

"Well, their girlfriend," I compromised and she laughed.

"But Pansy denied it. According to the papers she said she was just a jitterbug dancer and that was all. And that man was never in her room, the one accused of murder. Never, she said. No man ever had been. She claimed she was alone and sound asleep that night. That's what she said from the beginning. But, by then, The Congressman had been shipped out. . ."

"The *congressman?*" Susan clapped her hand to her head. "*What* congressman? You mean the one you showed me in the pictures with those horrible pasted heads?"

"Actually, yes," I said. "But then he was just called that. He was your daddy's commanding

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officer and they all called him The Congressman because he was the son of a politician," at which Susan laughed again, but I couldn't see anything funny, "and he planned to go into politics too, which he apparently did, after the war. That was another thing I looked up. His name. At least, the name of your daddy's commanding officer when they were shipped out and there it was, the same name as the one in the magazines. So what do you think of that?"

"I don't know *what* to think of it," said Susan. "I don't even know what this congressman or whatever had to do with anything."

"He was in love with Pansy Field, that's all. I remember your daddy saying he'd probably marry her if she could prove she was pure enough for him."

"*Daddy*?" cried Susan, shocked.

"For heaven's sake no. The Congressman, his exec. Your daddy was the one who said it. And then he said, when it first came out in the paper, the murder, that is, before the trial with Pansy's picture—I showed that to you, indicating she was involved, some way at least, then your daddy said something about that would tear it with the Congressman, that he couldn't tie onto anything that might hurt the future he had all laid out for

himself, and I guess it certainly did, but she was stuck with the lie so she repeated it all during the trial."

"What lie?" asked Susan.

"Why, the lie that the accused murderer wasn't with her that night. She told it just to keep The Congressman on the hook, then when he got away, she kept on telling it, too dumb to realize her lie would put a man in prison for life and too thoughtless to care."

"How do you know it was a lie?"

"Because it killed her."

"Mother! I don't see any connection."

"He threatened her. He stood up there in the courtoom and told her he'd get her for her lie. So that's the reason she moved

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around a lot. She told me she never stayed in one place long. She just moved herself, her pictures and magazines around and lived in a paper dream world with The Congressman because he had been the high point of her life back when she was young and rather pretty and sought after, before the fat and the inertia that had always been there came out of hiding. Since she wasn't too bright, she stayed right here in the state, and being unimaginative, she took back her legal name, so as soon as the man she'd put in prison was paroled, he just got out and started looking for her. And when he found her he assaulted her because she'd been Pansy Field and killed her because she was Mary Oliphant."

"What are you going to do?" Susan asked me.

"What do you think I'm going to do?" I said. "I'll tell the police who killed Mary. It's all very simple."

But was it so simple?

On the way home, I got to thinking. If a man has been punished for a crime he didn't commit, then doesn't he have a right later to commit a crime for which he will not be punished?

That is poetic justice.

And, anways, if I went to the police with my research and findings, they would just call me a psycho for thinking that Pansy Field's heads could have anything to do with Mary Oliphant's murder.

So I put the magazines and the pictures back in my linen closet behind all the sheets and if the police come up with some far-out suspect in the Mary Oliphant case, I'll show them how far-out that murder really was.

But not before.

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DETECTIVES BY GASLIGHT

SAM MOSKOWITZ

Introduces

THE VANISHED BILLIONAIRE

by B. FLETCHER ROBINSON

ONE OF THE least known and most underrated practitioners in the footsteps of Sherlock Holmes was Bertram Fletcher Robinson. He contributed so much to the creation of The Hound of the Baskervilles *that Sir Arthur Conan Coyle offered to add his name as a collaborator! Robinson, the editor of England's famed magazine* VANITY FAIR, *was one of Doyle's closest friends. They had met in South Africa covering the Boer War as correspondents and had sailed back to England on the steamship* Briton.

On Conan Doyle's return he went for a rest to Devon, accompanied by his friend Robinson. On April 2, 1901 he wrote from Rowe's Dutch Hotel, Princetown, Dartmoor, Devon: "Here I am in the highest town in England. Robinson and I are exploring the Moor over our Sherlock Holmes book. I think it will work out

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The man who started it all—the man who practically invented the ubiquitous private eye—had his instantaneous imitators—fortunately for us, or, all of those extraordinary sleuths and their remarkable stories might have remained still-born. Success bred rivals, and Sherlock Holmes' contemporaries will pass through these pages, ably selected and scholarly introduced by SAM MOSKOWITZ. Famed friends will ride hansom cabs once again.

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splendidly; indeed, I have already done nearly half of it. Holmes is at his very best, and it is a highly dramatic idea—which I owe to Robinson."

Robinson knew the legends of the area, and among those he told was one of a fearful ghostly hound. The concept of the hound as the center of the story and with Sherlock Holmes involved in its solving fascinated Doyle. Robinson helped him outline the situations of the story and took him on guided tours of the Moors to absorb atmosphere. He refused any offer of collaboration for his assistance in the construction of the crime masterpiece.

Robinson went on to write many fine detective stories himself, the best known The Chronicles of Addington Peace which appeared in 1905 from Harper's. A very remarkable series he wrote was The Trail of the Dead written in collaboration with J. Malcolm Fraser, six connected stories which ran in Great Britain's THE WINDSOR MAGAZINE, December, 1902 to May, 1903, only shortly after he had assisted A. Conan Doyle on The Hound of The Baskervilles. This series contains a full mosaic of background horror which Robinson managed to inject into those stories and introduced Sir Henry Graden, famous explorer and scientist cast in the detective's role. His nemesis was Rudolf Marnac, an arch criminal that almost made Professor Moriarty seem like a gentle, reasonable sort of soul.

Those stories, like others of Robinson's were not published in the United States. However, he achieved a popular reception in America with his Inspector Hartley stories which ran in PEARSON'S MAGAZINE. The waspish little inspector from Scotland Yard proved a brilliant diagnostician of the most confounding clues. The Vanished Billionaire is an excellent example of the indomitable Inspector Hartley in action. The story was originally printed in the February, 1905 issue of the American edition of PEARSON'S MAGAZINE.

Perhaps the major mistake Fletcher Robinson made was when he did not permit his name to be used as a collaborator on The Hound of the Baskervilles. Had he shared the credits for the endless reprinting of that mystery masterpiece, it surely would have ensured more careful evaluation of the fiction he did write under his own name and in collaboration with others. His works are well worth reviving.

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THE VANISHED BILLIONAIRE

by B. FLETCHER ROBINSON

I STOOD with my back to the fire, smoking and puzzling over it. The story was worth all the headlines they have given it; there was no loophole to the mystery.

Both sides of the Atlantic knew Silas J. Ford. He had established a business reputation in America that had made him a celebrity in England from the day he stepped off the liner. Once in London his syndicates and companies and consolidations had startled the slow-moving British mind. The commercial sky of the United Kingdom was overshadowed by him and his schemes. The papers were full of praise and blame, of puffs and denunciations.

Mr. Ford was a billionaire; he was on the verge of a smash that would paralyze the markets of the world. He was an abstainer, a drunkard; a gambler, a most religious man. He was a confirmed bachelor, a woman hater; his engagement was to be announced shortly. So was the ball kept rolling with the limelight always centered upon the spot where Silas J. Ford happened to be standing.

And now he had disappeared.

On the night of December 18th, a Thursday, he had left London for Meudon Hall, the fine old Hampshire mansion that he had rented from Lord Beverley. The two most trusted men in his office accompanied him. Friday morning he had spent with them; but at three o'clock the pair had returned to London, leaving their chief behind. From four to seven he had been shut up with his secretaries. It was a hard time for every one, a time verging upon panic; and at such times Silas J. Ford was not an idle man.

At eight o'clock he had dined. His one recreation was music, and after the meal he had played the organ in the picture gallery for an hour. At a quarter after ten he retired to his bedroom, dismissing Jackson, his body servant, for the night. Three-quarters of an hour later, however, Harbord, his secretary, had been called to the private telephone that Mr. Ford had lately erected to the neighboring town of Camdon. It was a message so urgent that he decided to wake his chief.

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There was no answer to his knock, and on entering the room he found that Mr. Ford was not in bed. He was surprised, but in no way suspicious, and started to search the house. He was joined by a footman and, a little later, by Jackson and the butler. Astonishment changed to alarm. Other servants were roused to aid in the quest. Finally a party provided with lanterns from the stables examined the grounds.

Snow had fallen early in the day, covering the great lawns in front of the entrance porch with a soft white blanket about an inch in thickness. It was the head groom who struck the trail. Apparently Mr. Ford had walked out of the porch and so over the drive and across the lawns toward the high wall that bounded the public road. This road, which led from Meudon village to the town of Camdon, crossed the front to Meudon Hall at a distance of some quarter of a mile.

There was no doubt as to the identity of the footprints for Silas Ford affected a broad, square-toed boot easily recognizable from its unusual impression.

They tracked him to within twenty feet of the wall, but there the footprints ended. The snow around them lay smooth and unbroken.

Apparently he had stepped into space!

A stable lad galloped to Camdon with the news while another went in search of the Meudon policeman. And there the message, which had been telegraphed to the London paper at 1:18 in the morning, came to its termination.

Paper in hand, I set off up the stairs to Inspector Hartley's room. I should never be able to put brush to canvas all day with so disturbing a mystery running in my head. Perhaps the little detective had later news from Scotland Yard to give me.

I found him standing with his back to the fire and his hands behind him. A bag, neatly strapped, lay on the rug at his feet. He gave me a quick look and a nod like the peck of a bird.

"I expected you, Mr. Phillips," he said, "and what do you think of it?"

"That the Camdon reporter has more imagination than accuracy."

"Not at all. This morning's details only confirm the statement he telegraphed last night."

"But you don't mean to tell me that—"

"I do. Twenty feet from the wall of the park the footsteps come to an abrupt end. And of Mr. Ford we have no further news."

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"In the name of sanity, how was it done?" I asked Inspector Hartley incredulously.

"It is rather 'why' than 'how' Mr. Phillips. Why did he go out alone last night? If he has run away—why? If he has been kidnapped—why? There is much that is instructive in that line of argument. However, as I am leaving for Paddington Station in fifteen minutes, I shall

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hope to have fuller information before night."

"Hartley," I asked him eagerly, "may I come with you?"

He glanced up at me with that odd smile of his that I knew so well.

"If you can be ready in time," he said.

It was past two o'clock when we arrived at the old town of Camdon. A carriage met us at the station. Five minutes more and we were clear of the narrow streets and climbing the first bare ridge of the downs. It was a desolate prospect enough, a bare expanse of windswept land that rose and fell with the sweeping regularity of the Pacific swell. Here and there a clump of ragged firs showed black against the snow. Under that soft carpet the crisp turf of the crests and the broad plow of the lower ground alike lay hidden. I shivered, drawing my coat more closely about me.

It was half an hour later that we topped a hillock and saw the gray towers of the ancient mansion beneath us. In the shelter of the valley, by the quiet river that now lay frozen into silence, the trees had grown into splendid woodlands, circling the hall on the farther side. From the broad front the white lawns crept down to the road on which we were driving. Dark masses of shrubberies and the tracery of scattered trees broke their silent curves. The park wall that fenced them from the road stood out like an ink-line ruled upon paper.

"It must have been there that he disappeared," I cried, with a speculative finger.

"So I imagine," said Hartley, "and if he spent the night on the Hampshire downs, he will be looking for a fire this morning. You have rather more than your fair share of the rug, Mr. Phillips, if you will excuse my mentioning it."

A man was standing on the steps of the entrance porch as we drove up. As we unrolled ourselves he stepped forward to help us. He was a thin, pale-faced fellow with fair hair and indeterminate eyes.

"My name is Harbord," he said. "You are Inspector Hartley, I believe."

His hand shook as he stretched it out in a tremulous greeting. Plainly the secretary was afraid, visibly and anxiously afraid.

"Mr. Ransome, the manager of Mr. Ford's London office is here," he continued. "He caught the newspaper train from Paddington station at four this morning. He is waiting to see you in the library."

We followed Harbord through a great hall, into a

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room lined with books from floor to ceiling. A stout, dark man who was pacing it stopped at the sight of us. His face as he turned it toward us looked pinched and gray in the morning light.

"Inspector Hartley, eh?" he said. "Well, Inspector, if you want a reward, name it. If you want to pull the house down, only say the word. But find him for us, or, by heaven, we're done!"

"Is it as bad as that?"

"You can keep a secret, I suppose? Yes—it couldn't well be worse. It was a tricky time; he hid half his schemes in his own head; he never trusted even me altogether. If he were dead I could plan something, but now—"

He thumped his hand on the table and turned away to the window.

"When you last saw Mr. Ford was he in good health? Did he stand the strain?"

"Ford had no nerves. He was never better in his life."

"In these great transactions he would have his enemies. If his plans succeeded there would be many hard hit, perhaps ruined. Have you any suspicion of a man who, to save himself, might kidnap Mr. Ford?"

"No," said the manager after a moment's thought. "No, I cannot give you a single name. The players are all big men, Inspector. I don't say that their consciences would stop them from trying such a trick; but it wouldn't be worth their while. They hold off when the jail is the certain punishment."

"Was this financial crisis in his own affairs generally known?"

"Certainly not."

"Who would know of it?"

"There would be a dozen men on both sides of the Atlantic who might suspect the truth. But I don't suppose that more than four people were actually in possession of the facts."

"And who on earth would they be?"

"His two partners in America, myself and Mr. Harbord there."

Hartley turned to the young man with a smile and a polite bow.

"Can you add any names to the list?" he asked.

"No," said Harbord, staring at the detective with a puzzled look as if trying to catch the drift of his questions.

"Thank you," said Hartley. "And now will you show me the place where this curious thing occurred."

We crossed the drive, where the snow lay torn and trampled by the carriages, and so to the white, even surface of the lawn. We soon struck the trail, a

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confused path beaten by many footprints.

Hartley stooped for a moment and then turned on the secretary with an angry glance. "Were you with them?" he said.

"Yes."

"Then why, in the name of common sense, didn't you keep them off his tracks? You have simply trampled them out of existence between you!"

"We were in a hurry, Inspector," said the secretary; "we didn't think about it."

We walked forward, following the broad trail of the searchers until we came to a circular patch of trodden snow. Evidently they had stopped and stood talking together. On the farther side I saw the footprints of a man clearly defined. There were some five or six clear impressions.

"I am glad you and your friends left me something, Mr. Harbord," snapped Hartley.

"When we saw that Mr. Ford's footprints went no farther we stopped. I suggested that we should do so. It had evidently become a matter for the police."

"I take it that those boot-nails to the right and left mark the subsequent investigations of the village constable."

"Yes, that is so."

About twenty feet before us was the high wall that separated the lawns from the road. An old oak rose on the farther side of it. One huge limb was thrust across the coping, spreading the extremities of its leafless twigs over our heads. Hartley stood glaring up at it in profound contemplation.

"I thought of the oak," said the secretary presently, "but how did he get from the ground to a branch a good six feet above him?"

"Exactly, Mr. Harbord."

"If he had used a ladder," continued the secretary, "there would be marks upon the snow; if he had swarmed up a rope, surely he would have moved about while he prepared for his climb. A lasso from above could hardly have jerked him from the ground without a kick or two. The footprints end in two firm impressions as if he had stepped off the earth in his stride."

"As you say, it is really remarkable—remarkable indeed," said Hartley.

"Inexplicable," murmured the secretary.

"There are not more than three solutions," said Hartley. "And now, if you please, we will go back to the house."

In the entrance hall the Inspector inquired after Jackson, the valet, and in a couple of minutes he appeared. He was a tall, hatchet-faced fellow, very

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neatly dressed in black. He made a little bow and then stood watching us in a respectful attitude.

"A queer business this, Jackson," said Hartley.

"Yes, sir."

"And what is your opinion on it?"

"To be frank, sir, I thought, at first, that Mr. Ford had run away; but now I don't know what to make of it."

"And why should he run away?"

"I have no idea, sir; but he seemed to me rather strange in his manner yesterday."

"Have you been with him long?"

"No, sir. I was valet to the Honorable John Dorn, Lord Beverley's second son. Mr. Ford took me from Mr. Dorn at the time he rented the Hall."

"I see. And now will you show me your master's room. I shall see you again later, Mr. Harbord," Hartley continued. "In the meanwhile I will leave my assistant with you."

We sat and smoked in the secretary's room. He was not much of a talker, consuming cigarette after cigarette in silence. Presently Ransome came in, banging the door behind him. I suspect he was a harsh, ill-tempered man at the best, but now he was about the most disagreeable companion imaginable. He could not sit still for two consecutive minutes, roaming about the room, pestering me with questions as to my opinion on the case, lighting cigars and throwing them into the fire unsmoked.

The winter duck had already fallen when the Inspector joined us, and a very ragged and disheveled figure he made, with a great tear down his trouser leg.

"I'm too old for it," he said with a smile at our astonished faces. "I shall have to leave tree-climbing to younger men."

"May I ask why you take this occasion to amuse yourself in so remarkable a way?" asked Ransome. The man's anxiety was telling on him; that was plain enough.

"I should hardly describe it as amusement," said the Inspector with a glance at his torn clothes. "And as it is close upon dinnertime I must ask you to excuse me while I borrow a needle and thread."

THE DINNER dragged itself to an end and we left Ransome with a second decanter of port before him. Hartley slipped away again and I consoled myself with a book in the library until half past ten, when I walked off to bed. A servant was switching off the light in

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the hall when I mounted the great staircase.

My room was in the old wing at the farther side of the picture gallery, and I had some difficulty in steering my way through the dark corridors. The mystery that hung over the house had shaken my nerves, and I remember that I started at every creak of a board and peered into the shadows as I passed along with heaven knows what ghostly expectations. I was glad enough to close my door upon them and see the wood fire blazing cheerfully in the open hearth.

I woke with a start that left me sitting up in bed with my heart thumping in my ribs like a piston rod. I am not generally a light sleeper, but that night even while I snored my nerves were active. Some one had tapped at my door; that was my impression.

I listened with the uncertain fear that comes to the newly waked. Then I heard it again—on the wall near my head this time. A board creaked. Some one was groping his way down the dark corridor without. Presently he stopped and a faint line of illumination sprang out under my door. It winked and then grew still. He had lighted a candle.

Assurance came with the streak of light. What was he doing, groping in the dark, if he had a candle with him? I crept over to the door, opened it and stared cautiously out.

About a dozen feet away a man was standing, a dark silhouette against the light he carried. His back was toward me; but I could see that his hand was shading the candle from his eyes while he stared into the shadows that clung about the farther end of the corridor.

Presently he began to move forward.

The picture gallery and the body of the house were behind us. The corridor in which he stood terminated in a window, set deep into the stone of the old walls. The man walked slowly, throwing the light to right and left. His attitude was of nervous expectation that of a man who looked for something that he feared to see.

At the window he stopped, staring about him and listening. He examined the fastenings and then tried a door on his right. It was locked against him. As he did so I caught his profile against the light. It was Harbord, the secretary. From where I stood he was not more than forty feet away. There was no possibility of a mistake.

As he turned to come back I retreated into my room, closing the door. The fellow was in a

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state of great agitation and I could hear him muttering to himself as he walked. When he had gone by I peeped out to see him and his light dwindle, reach the corner by the picture gallery and so fade into a reflection, a darkness.

I took care to turn the key before I got back into bed.

I woke again at seven and hurrying on my clothes set off to tell Hartley all about it. I took him to the place and together we examined the corridor. There were only two rooms beyond mine. The one on the left was occupied by Ransome; that on the right was a large store-room, the door of which was locked. The housekeeper kept the key, we learned upon inquiry. Whom had Harbord followed? The problem was beyond me. As for Inspector Hartley, he did not indulge in verbal speculations.

It was in the central hall that we met with the secretary on his way to the breakfast room. He looked nervous and depressed; he nodded to us and was passing on when Hartley stopped him.

"Good-morning, Mr. Harbord" he said. "Can I have a word with you?"

"Certainly, Inspector. What is it?"

"I have a favor to ask. My assistant and myself have our hands full here. If necessary could you help us by going to London and—"

"For the day?" he interrupted.

"No. It may be an affair of three or four days."

"Then I must refuse. I am sorry, but—"

"Don't apologize, Mr. Harbord," said the little man cheerfully. "I shall have to find some one else—that is all!"

We walked into the breakfast room and a few minutes later Ransome appeared with a great bundle of letters and telegrams in his hand. He said not a word to any of us, but dropped into a chair tearing open the envelopes and glancing at their contents. His face grew darker as he read and once he thumped his hand upon the table with a crash that set the china jingling.

"Well, Inspector?" he said at last.

The little detective's head shook out a negative.

"Perhaps it is a matter of reward," said the manager.

"No, Mr. Ransome; but it is becoming one of my personal reputation."

"Then, by thunder, you are in danger of losing it! Why don't you and your friend there hustle instead of loitering around as if you were paid by the job. I tell you, man, there are thousands, hundreds of

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thousands melting, slipping through our fingers, every hour of the day."

He sprang from his seat and started his walk again, up and down, up and down, as we had just seen him.

"Shall you be returning to London?"

At the question the manager halted in his stride, staring sharply down into Hartley's face.

"No," he said, "I shall stay here, Inspector, until such time as you have something definite to tell me."

"I have an inquiry to make which I would rather place in the hands of some one who has personal knowledge of Mr. Ford. Neither Mr. Harbord nor yourself desires to leave Meudon. Is there any one else you can suggest?"

"There is Jackson, Ford's valet," said Ransome after a moment's thought. "He can go if you think him bright enough. I'll send for him."

While the footman who answered the bell was gone upon his errand we waited in uneasy silence. There was the shadow of mystery upon us all. Jackson, as he entered, was the only one who seemed at his ease. He stood there a tall figure of all the respectabilities.

"The Inspector here wishes you to go to London, Jackson," said the manager. "He will explain the details. There is a train from Camdon at twelve."

"Certainly, sir. Do I return to-night?"

"No, Jackson," said Hartley; "it will take a day or two."

The man took a couple of steps toward the door, hesitated and then returned to his former place.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he began, addressing Ransome, "but I would rather remain at Meudon under present circumstances."

"What the devil do you mean?" thundered the manager.

"Well, sir, I was the last to see Mr. Ford. There is, as it were, a suspicion upon me. I should like to be present while the search continues both for his sake—and my own."

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," growled Ransome, "but you either do what I tell you, Jackson, or you can look for another job. So be quick and make up your mind."

"I think you are treating me most unfairly, sir. But I cannot be persuaded out of what I know to be my duty."

"You impertinent rascal—" began the furious manager. But Hartley was already on his feet with a hand outstretched.

"Perhaps, after all, I can make other arrangements with Mr. Ransome," he said. "It is

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natural that Jackson should consider his own reputation in this affair. That is all, Jackson; you may go now."

IT WAS half an hour afterward, when the end of breakfast had dispersed the party, that I spoke to Hartley about it, offering to go to London myself and to do my best to carry out his instructions.

"I had bad luck in my call for volunteers," he said.

"I should have thought they would have been glad enough to get the chance of work. They can find no particular amusement in loafing about the place all day."

"Doubtless they all had excellent reasons," he said with a little smile. "But, anyway, you cannot be spared, Mr. Phillips."

"You flatter me."

"I want you to stay in your bedroom. Write, read, do what you like—but keep your door ajar. If any one passes down the corridor, see where he goes—only don't let him know that you are watching him if you can help it. I will take my turn at half past one. I don't mean to starve you."

I obeyed. After all, it was in a manner promotion that Hartley had given me.

Yet it was a tedious, anxious time. No one came my way barring a sour-looking housemaid. I tried to argue out the case, but the deeper I got the more conflicting grew my theories. I was never more glad to see a friendly face than when the little man came in upon me.

The short winter's afternoon crept on, the Inspector and I taking turn and turn about in our sentry duty. Dinner-time came and went. I had been off since nine and at ten thirty I poured out a whisky and soda and went back to join him. He was sitting in the middle of the room, smoking a pipe in great apparent satisfaction.

"Bedtime, isn't it?" I grumbled, sniffing at the strong tobacco.

"Oh, no," he said. "The fact is, we are going to sit up all night."

I threw myself on a couch by the window without reply; perhaps I was not in the best of tempers; certainly I did not feel so.

"You insisted on coming down with me," he suggested.

"I know all about that," I told him; "I haven't complained, have I? If you want me to shut myself up for a week I'll do it; but I should prefer to have some idea of the reason why."

"I don't wish to create mysteries, Mr. Phillips," he said kindly. "But, believe me, there is nothing to be gained and

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much that may be lost in vague discussions."

I knew that settled it as far as he was concerned, so I nodded my head and filled a pipe. At eleven he walked across the room and switched off the light.

"If nothing happens you can take your time at the wheel in four hours from now," he said. "In the meanwhile get to sleep. I will keep the first watch."

I shut my eyes, but there was no rest in me that night. I lay listening to the silence of the old house with a dull speculation. Somewhere far down in the lower floor a great gong-like clock chimed the hours and quarters. I heard them every one, from twelve to one, from one to two. Hartley had stopped smoking and sat silent.

It must have been some fifteen minutes after two that I heard the faint creak of a board in the corridor outside. I sat up, every nerve strung to a tense alertness. Then there came a sound I knew well, the soft drawing touch of a hand groping in the darkness as some one felt his way along the paneled walls. It passed us and was gone. Yet Hartley never moved. Could he have fallen asleep? I whispered his name.

"Hush."

The answer came to me like a gentle sigh.

One minute, two minutes more and the room sprang into sight under the steady glow of an electric hand-lamp. Inspector Hartley rose from his seat and slid through the door with me upon his heels. The light he carried searched the clustered shadows; but the corridor was empty. Nor was there any place where a man might hide.

"You waited too long," I whispered impatiently.

"The man is no fool, Mr. Phillips. Do you imagine that he was not listening and staring like a hunted beast. A noisy board, a stumble or a flash of light and—we should have wasted a tiring day."

"Nevertheless he has got clear away."

"I think not."

As we crept forward I saw that a strip of the oak flooring along the walls was gray with dust. If it had been in such a neglected state in the afternoon I should surely have noticed it. In some curiosity I stooped to examine the phenomenon.

"Flour," whispered the little man, touching my shoulder.

"Flour?"

"Yes. I sprinkled it myself. Look—there is the first result." He steadied his light as he spoke, pointing with his other hand. On the powdery surface was the half-footprint of a man.

The flour did not extend

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more than a couple of feet from the walls, so that it was only here and there that we caught up the trail. We had passed the bedroom on the left—yet the footprints still went on; we were at the store-room door, yet they still were visible before us. There was no other egress from the corridor. The tall window at the end was, as I knew, a good twenty feet from the ground. Had this man also vanished off the earth like Silas Ford?

Suddenly the Inspector stopped, grasping my arm. The light he held fell upon two footprints close together. They were at right angles to the passages. Apparently the man had passed into the solid wall!

"Hartley, what does it mean?"

"Have you never heard of a 'priest's hole'?" he whispered. "In the days when Meudon Hall was built no country house was without its hiding-place. Protestants and priests, Royalists and Republicans—they all used the secret burrow at one time or another."

"How did he get in?"

"That is what we are here to discover; and as I have no wish to destroy Mr. Ford's old oak panels I think our simplest plan will be to wait until he comes back again."

The shadows leaped upon us as Hartley extinguished the light he carried. The great window alone was luminous with the faint starlight that showed the tracery of its ancient stonework; for the rest, the darkness

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hedged us about in impenetrable barriers. Side by side we stood by the wall in which we knew the secret entrance must exist.

It may have been ten minutes or more, when from the distance—somewhere below our feet, or so it seemed to me—there came the faint echo of a closing door. It was only in such cold silence that we could have heard it. The time ticked on. Suddenly upon the black of the floor there sprang a thin reflection like the slash of a sword—a reflection that grew and broadened into a gush of light as the sliding panel in the wall, six feet from where we stood, rose to the full opening. There followed another pause, during which I could see Hartley draw himself together as if for some unusual exertion.

A shadow darkened the reflection on the floor and a head came peering out. The light but half displayed his face, but I could see that his teeth were bare and glistening like those of a man in some deadly expectation. The next moment he stepped across the threshold.

With a spring like the rush of a terrier Hartley was upon him, driving him off his balance with the impact of the blow. Before I could reach them, the little detective had him beat, though he still kicked viciously until I lent a hand. The click of the handcuffs on his wrists ended the matter.

It was Ford's valet, the man Jackson.

We were not long by ourselves. I heard a key turned in the lock and Ransome burst out of his room into the corridor, like an angry bull. Almost at the same moment there sounded a quick patter of naked feet from behind us and Harbord came running up swinging a heavy stick in his hand.

They both stopped at the edge of the patch of light in which we were, staring from us to the gaping hole in the wall.

"What the deuce are you about?" cried Ransome.

"Finding an answer to your problem," said the detective, getting to his feet.

Hartley stepped through the opening in the wall and lifted the candle which the valet had placed on the floor while he was raising the panel from within. By its light I could see the first steps of a flight that led down into darkness.

"We will take Jackson with us," Hartley said. "Keep an eye on him, Mr. Phillips, if you please."

It was a strange procession that we made. First Hartley with the candle, then Ransome with Jackson following, while Harbord and I brought up the

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rear. We descended some thirty steps, formed in the thickness of the wall, opened a heavy door and so found ourselves in a narrow chamber some twelve feet long by seven broad. Upon a mattress at the farther end lay a man, gagged and bound.

As the light fell upon his features, Ransome sprang forward, shouting his name. "Silas Ford, by thunder!"

With eager fingers we loosened the gag and cut the ropes that bound his wrists. He sat up, turning his long thin face from one to the other of us as he stretched the cramp from his limbs.

"Thank you, gentlemen," said he. "Well, Ransome, how are things?"

"Bad, sir, but it's not too late." He nodded his head, passing his hands through his hair with a quick, nervous movement.

"You've caught my clever friend, I see. Kindly go through his pockets, will you? He has something I must ask him to return to me."

We found it in Jackson's pocket-book, a check antedated a week, for five thousand pounds, with a covering letter to the manager of the bank. Ford took the bit of stamped paper, twisting it to and fro in his supple fingers.

"It was smart of you, Jackson," he said, addressing the bowed figure before him; "I give you credit for the idea. To kidnap a man just as he was bringing off a big thing—well, you would have earned the money"

"But how did you get down here?" asked Ransome in bewilderment.

"He told me that he had discovered an old hiding-place—a 'priest's hole' he called it, and I walked into the trap, like the best man may do sometimes. As we got to the bottom of that stairway he slipped a noose over my head and had me fixed in thirty seconds. He fed me himself twice a day, standing by to see I didn't shout. When I paid up he was to have twenty-four hours' start. Then he would let you know where I was. I held out a while, but I gave in to-night. The delay was getting too dangerous. Have you a cigarette, Harbord? Thank you. And who may you be?"

It was to the detective he spoke.

"My name is Hartley, Inspector Hartley from Scotland Yard."

"And I owe my rescue to you?"

The little man from Scotland Yard bowed.

"You will have no reason to regret it."

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IT WAS as we traveled up to town next day that Hartley told me his story. I will set it down as briefly as may be.

"Men do not vanish, Mr. Phillips," he said, "even though they are billionaires—who can do most things. After I left you in the afternoon of our arrival, I examined the road that skirted the park wall. The traffic of the day added to a flock of sheep had cut and trodden the snow out of all practical uses. I managed to climb the trunk of the oak which, as you will remember, grew outside the wall, and so made my way along a great branch to the spot beneath which the footsteps disappeared.

"I could see that some one had been in the tree before me. The manner of Ford's escape seemed plain.

"I dropped from the branch and again examined the footprints. The last two were remarkable. They were far more clearly defined than the rest. What accounted for this sudden increase in Ford's weight? If he had dropped as I had done instead of starting to climb—That was how the truth occurred to me.

"But was it Ford at all? It would be easy enough for a man desiring to leave evidence of the financier's escape behind him to have stolen a pair of Ford's boots. I remembered the sudden telephone message and Harbord's search for his chief. What if the man laying the false trail had seen the lights spring up in the house and had failed to complete his work, rushing back that his absence might not be noted? But the footsteps led away from the house. Might not the boots have been reversed?

"From what I have since discovered my reasoning was correct. Jackson intended to lay a trail across the snow to the park wall that it might be thought that his master had for his own purposes run away. But how could he return without laying a double track? To avoid this he tied on the boots in reverse fashion, intending to climb the wall from the road and return across the lawns to the house. To do this he swarmed up the oak as I had done and struggled along the branch. As he did so he saw the lights spring up in his master's room. Without further thought of the strange evidence he had left behind him, he dropped to the ground and rushed back as fast as he could.

"But to continue my story: If these were not Ford's footprints he had not run away. Either he had been carried off, had been murdered and his body concealed, or he was still in the house. Who would desire

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to kidnap or murder him? There lay the mystery. A kidnapper would have probably acted with some idea of ransom. This suggested a knowledge of his business complications, and the exceptional opportunity for blackmail. Who knew the truth? Ransome, Harbord certainly; Jackson possibly. That was all that I could learn from them.

"Your story of Harbord's excursion supplies a clue. The secretary had evidently followed some man who had disappeared mysteriously. Could there be the entrance to a secret chamber in that corridor? That would explain the mystification of Harbord as well as the disappearance of Silas Ford. If so, Harbord was not involved—but who was?

"If Ford was held a prisoner, he must be fed. His jailer must of necessity remain in the house. But the trap I set in the suggested journey to London was an experiment singularly unsuccessful, for all the three men I desired to test refused. However, if I was right about the secret chamber I could checkmate the blackmailer by keeping a watch on him from your room, which commanded the line of communications. But Jackson was clever enough to leave his victualing to the night-time. I scattered flour to try the result of that ancient trick. It was successful. That is all. Do you follow me?"

"Yes," said I, "but how did Jackson come to know of the hiding-place?"

"He was a servant in the house years before Silas Ford rented it, remember," said Hartley.

"He is a clever fellow, that Jackson. It was a pleasure to meet him."

Next Month's DETECTIVES BY GASLIGHT Masterpiece:

THE SPINDLE CLUE

by ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

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They had everything going for them. Her beauty, his brains and charm. Everything that could meet the eye—and maybe a deadly bit more. . .

A MATTER OF CHARACTER

by GROVER BRINKMAN

THE HALLIBURTON place was a mile east of Templeton, a tumbledown, ten-acre briar patch that had once been a poultry farm. When John and Marge Saxon moved there, a few shoulders shrugged at their apparent folly. But on second thought, perhaps it wasn't folly at all. John Saxon, a Vietnam veteran, was blind.

The two-story frame house with its peeling paint, was still liveable, furnished. If they were looking for cheap rent, and without doubt they were, their choice was commendable. Marge intimated at one of the super markets one day that John intended starting a mail order business, and she figured a few chickens and a vegetable garden might bolster their economy, at least through the first critical months of their new venture.

Templeton was an inland ranch town of eight thousand, with the usual suburban sprawl, plus several new buildings dotting the town square.

The most imposing structure in town was the new Cattleman's National Bank. John Saxon opened a small checking account at the bank soon after their arrival. He seemed to get along very well on the street, one hand on Marge's arm, feeling his way with his white cane, walking faster than most blind people do.

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Marge was a looker. Not voluptuous exactly, but surely no undernourished fashion model either. She had reddish-gold hair and wore it loose, letting it fall about her shoulders. In a peasant blouse and snug-fitting pants, she was a woman who made men take a deep breath and wonder why she was married to a blind man.

Not that John Saxon didn't command his own share of attention. He was six-two, slim-waisted, straight as an arrow, athletic. He wore his

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black hair rather long. If it wasn't for the large black glasses, he might have been termed rather handsome.

"Very glad to welcome you as a new customer, Mr. Saxon," said John Whiting, first vice president of the bank.

"Thank you!" Saxon said. "You have a very commanding voice, sir"

Whiting seemed surprised. "No one has ever alluded to it in those terms."

"When you're blind, voices are important."

Whiting's eyebrows raised. "Yes! Yes, of course!"

"I'm sure I'll recognize you the next time I make a deposit," Saxon said, smiling loosely, "That is, if you say hello."

They walked out, Saxon tap-tapping his way with the white cane.

"Very commendable!" Whiting said after the couple were on the street, and wagged his head in disbelief. "Young, blind, and still cheerful!"

Marge drove the ancient hack that at the moment was their only means of transportation.

"I believe you impressed the banker," she said and chuckled.

John patted her leg. "We'll impress him very much, one of these davs. won't we, hon?"

"Very, very much!" Marge said, a tight smile on her sultry mouth, and wheeled the hack up the narrow driveway to the chicken farm, her thoughts far removed from the ramshackle homestead they called home.

After dinner, with the shades drawn in the farm kitchen, John Saxon took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes.

"You look like an owl!" Marge said. "Your whole face is tanned except your eyes."

"Let's forget about how I look," he said, "and go over the plans again."

"First you could dry the dishes for me."

"Sure, hon!" He picked up the dish towel. "A blind man might drop some of the china." He chuckled.

The idea had first occurred to him while they were on their honeymoon in Bermuda. There seemed to be a lot of easy money in the Bermuda beach crowd. That is, most of the crowd. Personally, he was down to his last hundred bucks.

"There must be some foolproof way to rob a bank," he said, staring at the vivid blue of the sea.

Marge adjusted the fragile shoulder strap of her too-tight bikini. "You serious, lover?"

"I'd be very serious, if I could work out some feasible plan."

She cuddled closer, a new

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light of anticipation building in her gray-green eyes.

"You really mean it, don't you?"

"Of course! Any objections?"

She was long in answering. "No, not one. Only—"

"You're thinking of the risk involved, getting caught, going to prison."

"So are you."

"Right! But there must be a way, something so foolproof that we could pull it off in one town, then move across country and do it again."

He kept thinking about it. This thought process became somewhat of a compulsion, after a time. There must be some way to pull off a caper without kickback, make a clean getaway. After a time, noticing his abstraction, Marge fell to thinking about it as well. Grab up fifteen or twenty grand by flashing an empty gun! Just like that. No qualms of conscience, for banks were rich, and their insurance companies even richer.

He reviewed in his mind all of the famous bank robberies that had made the news headlines in the past years. Most of the bandits had got caught sooner or later. That merely showed they had not planned out the caper down to the last minute detail. Always they had been tripped up by some little flaw they had overlooked.

But if he and Marge pulled a caper, there would be no tripping up. For they wouldn't try it unless they had a fool-proof plan.

And then, right out of the blue, the idea dawned!

It was the last day at Bermuda. Tomorrow would mean returning home, finding some mediocre job—or starve.

At the time, Marge was swimming alone, well off shore. He dived in and created some kind of a marathon to reach her side. He let down, found he could touch the sand. He reached out, pulled her wet form hard against his own, kissed her damp mouth with a new intensity in his caress.

"I've got it, hon!"

"You're kidding!"

"No, I'm not kidding. I'll tell you, soon as we hit the beach."

They lay on the warm sand, breathing hard, and he explained his idea. He couldn't go into details, for as yet he hadn't worked out the fine points. It was the idea itself that counted.

She looked at him long and hard, mouth slightly parted, gray-green eyes on his own.

"Blind man? Honey, it just might work!"

"Of course it will work! It needs a lot more thought, to

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work out each tiny detail. But the idea itself is workable!"

She rolled into his arms and kissed him, cradling her lush body against his own.

"I'm married to a blind man? That's real touching. A Vietnam vet, blind!"

It had taken every dollar they could scrape up to make the first payment on the farm lease, plus a small checking account at the bank.

It hadn't been exactly easy, getting used to the black glasses from dawn to dark. He had practised, too, the walk of a sightless man. The white cane and Marge's arm completed the picture.

"How much do you suppose we can tag them for?" Marge asked, as she washed the dishes.

"Eighteen to twenty grand, if we make the hit on a Friday morning"

That figured. Friday was a big day at the bank, cashing ranch and payroll checks. The tellers would have more cash in their tills on Friday morning than on any other work day.

"The getaway is the problem," he admitted. "From the bank back to the farm, without being seen."

They drove into town in the hack each morning, on some pretense of business. Marge invariably parked the car where he could get a good vision of the bank. Ofttimes he remained in the car while she did some needed shopping.

There was a rear entrance to the bank, he found out presently. It was used chiefly by courthouse officials and business men in the block, who saved a few steps using the rear entrance.

Now if he could make the caper, slip out the back way—

One more problem to be solved! Marge, driving the hack, had to be nearby, preferably in an alley, to pick him up. She had to pick him up without being seen.

That little bit of magic might be the most important item in the entire plan.

He needed at least two minutes, after the caper had been pulled, to make a character transition. Two minutes of uninterrupted time. The entire caper depended on this one thing.

"Let's go over it again," Marge suggested.

"Okay. Remember first that I've only been seen on the streets as a blind man, black glasses and cane. Dark trousers, an old sweater. Clean shaven."

"Right! So for the caper you make a transition. Natty business suit, small mustache, no glasses, narrow-brim hat."

"And no white cane or halting gait."

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She nodded. "One more problem. Where do I pick you up without being seen?"

"That's the sticker!" he admitted, his brow furrowed.

The checking account at the bank was near depletion, so they drove to Austin, thirty-two miles distant, where Marge got a loan on a small diamond brooch that had been a gift of her late mother.

The next morning they deposited fifty dollars to their ailing checking account, used the back door upon their exit.

"Why?" Marge whispered, piloting him toward the exit.

"Just a hunch!" Saxon said.

They headed down the empty alley. Then suddenly Saxon whistled through his teeth.

"There it is!" he said. "The solution to our problem!"

Marge was suddenly tense. "I don't follow you—"

"That old unpainted shed!" he said. "Perfect!"

Back in the hack, heading for home, his hand again descended to her leg.

"Did you see what I saw? That old shed evidently was a garage at one time. Maybe for a Model T Ford. No doubt it'll come down one of these days. It's double door has a padlock on it."

"So?"

"There was a loose board, a very wide board, on the side of the shack."

"You mean we hide inside?"

"Exactly!" he said. "We'll come into town well before dawn, before anyone is on the streets, park the hack in some residential area where it won't be noticed. Then we'll head for the shack."

At long last they worked out the plan to the last tiny detail. It would mean a long sojourn in the shack, from dawn of day to nightfall. But it also was a fool-proof plan.

"Unless someone blunders into the shack."

"It's been boarded up for a long time. The odds are a million to one."

"Okay, lover. This is it. Friday morning!"

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"Thursday night for us, baby."

Saxon started at once to make preparations. He unloaded the stub-nosed gun, a .38 he had picked up in the service. He didn't intend to murder anyone, merely to bluff a few people for some folding money.

He stripped naked, put on the old trousers and sweater he used in his 'blind' appearance. No underclothing. For over this outfit he had to slip on the business suit, a white shirt and tie. He took a quick look in the mirror.

"A little baggy."

"Not at all noticeable," Marge said.

He carefully combed his hair, donned the hat. Lastly he put on the fake mustache, picked up the attache case.

"Give me the careful look," he said to Marge. "The old weather eye, hon."

He walked up and down the room, took different stances, waiting for her decision. The single incandescent hanging from the ceiling of the kitchen didn't give off too much light, but at last Marge nodded her head in approval.

"You look swell," she said. "Drop the gun in your coat pocket and see if I can tell it."

Later, she wagged her head in the negative.

"We're all set, hon!" She sat down, exhaled. "I'm so damned tight I'm ready to flip."

He started to undress.

"We'll hit the sack until 3:30," he said. "That will get us there in plenty of time."

"I can't sleep—"

"Who said anything about sleeping?" he asked.

On the bed, he thought of something. "Did you make up the sandwiches? Okay. We'll get hungry as hell if you forget them."

Suddenly she clutched him. "Hon, when you make the caper, you'll be compelled to say something, some command. Whitting might recognize your voice!"

"Relax!" he said. "You know I have a falsetto voice, if I need it."

"Of course! I'm really up tight."

Seconds later, her fingers clasped him again in nervous frenzy. "What will you do, from the hour of dawn until the bank opens?"

"Good question," he said, utterly calm. "I've got to leave the shack before it's light enough for someone to spot me. So I'll take a long walk from one end of town to the other, get some breakfast. The bank opens at 8:30, remember. At 8:35 I'll be waving the gun."

"How long for the caper?"

"Five minutes," he said. "No

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longer than six. I'll go in breezily, flourish the gun, tell them in my falsetto voice that this is a stickup. I'll push the attache case to the first teller, she'll pass it to the second, to the third. Five minutes, no longer than six."

"What if you meet some opposition?"

"Hon, remember they'll be under a gun, very frightened, anxious to please."

She made no rebuttal. He presumed she was asleep. Then she rolled into his arms as some disturbing thought struck home with terror.

"Won't there be cameras in the bank? It's a new bank, and all new banks have cameras that take pictures automatically."

"Of course there'll be cameras," he said, unruffled. "The film will show a dapper young man, neatly dressed, with a mustache, and a soft-brimmed hat."

She sighed in relief. "Forgive me. I can't think, I'm so nervous."

IT WAS a moonless night, warm for October. John Saxon dressed carefully.

"Don't forget the sandwiches and pop," he said, making a final check.

They parked the car on a residential street, three blocks north of the town square. There were other cars parked nearby, so the hack wasn't conspicuous.

Very silently they walked toward the alley in back of the bank. He was quite positive that the night patrolmen went off duty at 3:30, and the day force didn't come on until six. Even so, he looked sharply for some sign of a human being as they headed for the old garage.

But they saw no one. Ten minutes later he had squeezed inside, through the opening he had previously spotted. Marge followed.

The shed was empty, except for a pile of debris, an old chair. It had a musty smell suggesting long disuse.

At 5:45 he checked the alley, saw it was empty, bid her good-by.

"I'll be back not later than 8:45," he whispered. "And I'll have the money!"

"Be careful, hon!"

"No sweat," he said, and meant it.

He walked south, once he gained the street. Then he saw the bus station, and decided he needed to walk no further. He would simply remain in the bus station until the allotted time. No one would question a man waiting for a bus.

At 8:42 Marge heard hurried footsteps approaching. The next instant he had squeezed through the opening, pushed

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the board back in place, and she was in his arms.

He waved the case at her.

"It's full of that nice green stuff!" he whispered. "No sweat. No sweat at all!"

He heard a siren at that moment. She clutched him tighter.

"Relax!" he said.

"I'm still scared stiff."

"Nothing to be frightened about. All we do is sit tight."

That's what they did. Through cracks in the old building, they could see the sudden activity at the bank, the police cars, the state highway troopers. Suddenly John Whiting came out on the back stoop with an officer, looked up and down the alley, shook his head.

"They can't figure it out!" he whispered. "Where was the escape car parked? How did it get out of town so quickly?"

"I'll bet there are road blocks on all of the highways leading out of town."

"Road blocks, and some very perplexed cops."

She clutched him. "Was there any resistance?"

"Honey, they were scared stiff. Simply scared stiff. When I was ready to leave I made them all hit the floor on their tummies—"

"It worked!"

"It worked beautifully. I got inside the shed before anyone even came outside the bank building."

Now it was simply a matter of waiting. He got out of the business suit, pulled off the fake mustache, put on the black glasses.

They counted the money, to help pass the hours. "Eighteen thousand, two hundred and forty-six dollars!" he whispered.

Time dragged slowly. Still playing it safe, as evening shadows darkened the interior of the shed, he took the money from the attache case, gave half of it to Marge, and secreted the balance in his pockets.

Marge chuckled. "I've heard of bras being used for various purposes, but this is a new one—"

He scraped out a deep hole in the soft loam, buried the empty attache case, the clothing he had used on the caper, even the sandwich wrapper and pop cans.

"We'll sneak out, soon as it gets good and dark," he said. "Once we're on the street, we've got it made."

"What if someone looks inside the shack?"

"I've thought of that, too. I'll brush out every track."

It was 9:12 when they got back to the farm. They had managed to steal out of the alley unseen. The car was still

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parked where they had left it. There was no tail, no sweat.

Once inside the old house, with the door locked and the shades drawn, he scooped her up in his arms, and they danced merrily about the room.

"We did it, hon! I told you it would work!"

"I'm still frightened. Any moment someone will knock on our door."

"Hon, relax. I'm hungry as a wolf, so let's get some food cooking."

No one knocked on the door, as he said.

After a week, even Marge began to unwind. They had gone back to town the next day. He had tap-tapped his way down the street, into the post office, several stores, listening to the scuttlebutt.

The small daily paper had given the bank robbery a banner line across the front page. The story stressed the fact that a lone bandit had held up the bank and escaped so quickly that it smacked of well-organized crime, a waiting accomplice who had somehow gotten out of town ahead of the law, et cetera.

"Two more weeks," he said. "Then we'll move out for parts unknown."

"Why don't we go right now?"

He shook his head. "It might incite suspicion. Two more weeks won't be a problem, lover."

The following Monday, washing dishes at the sink, Marge made an observation.

"Someone's coming up the driveway."

He had on the glasses, the cane was hooked over a chair.

"Okay, we've had company before."

"This is the sheriff's car, hon."

"Okay, no sweat. Keep cool and let me handle it."

His mind suddenly was doing a reversal, a playback on the caper. No slipup, not even a minor one. Maybe the guy wanted to buy a few eggs. No sweat.

The man who knocked on the door had a silver star on his khaki shirt. He was about thirty, smooth shaven, with very wide shoulders.

Saxon tap-tapped to the door, opened it, stood on the threshhold.

"Mr. John Saxon?"

"Yes."

"I'm Nils Brutto, deputy sheriff. May I come in?"

"Of course!" Saxon said, stepped back. The white cane gestured. "My wife Marge is somewhere near the sink."

Marge's smile was tight, her hello far from enthusiastic.

"We've just completed an

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early lunch," Saxon explained. "But we still have some coffee."

"No, thanks!" the deputy said.

Saxon noticed now that he carried a large manila envelope. He faced away from the man with the cane, swung toward Marge.

"Mrs. Saxon, will you take off your husband's glasses?"

Something cold and icy slammed into Marge's chest.

"Take off John's glasses? Isn't that an odd request?"

"Take them off, please."

Her feet hesitant, Marge walked to John's side, took off the dark glasses.

The deputy advanced a step, his eyes cold and hard, boring into John Saxon's face.

"I was right," he said, as if consoling himself. "I argued with them for hours. They presumed I was plain nuts. But I knew I was on the right track. And then the photos came from the lab."

Brutto took out several large glossies from the manila envelope, handed them over.

"Mr. Saxon," he said, smiling tightly, "it was a very clever caper. You tied up all of the knots real tight. We still don't know how you made your getaway, one of the cleverest, no doubt. But that isn't important now, for the camera solved the case for us."

"Take a close look at the photos," he said.

And suddenly John Saxon was remembering something that Marge had said, long before the robbery. "You look like an owl. Your entire face is tanned except your eyes."

That precision camera, photographing the caper, showed a very personable young man brandishing a gun, a young man who had a very tanned face, except for his eyes!

In the Next Issue—

DEATH AND THE SINGLE GIRL

A New Thrilling Suspense Story

by GARY BRANDNER

She was my faithful companion, I her deadly enemy. I shook my head, knowing. Sooner or later both of us must learn the truth. Why—why not this very day?

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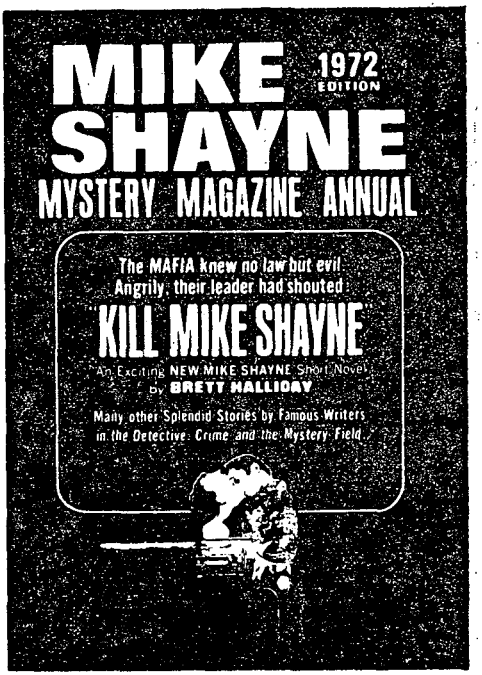
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Featuring

SERGEANT RENZO DI LUCCA

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THE METHODICAL COP

Death had held grisly carnival in that dark house of hate. Who was the killer? I'd find out—if he let me live to do it.

by BILL PRONZINI

DETECTIVE-SERGEANT Renzo Di Lucca had been a cop for twenty-seven years, a dedicated, patient and observant cop. Next to his wife Rosa who had borne him three sons and who made the best *fettucine* in the world, Di Lucca loved police work more than anything else.

There was, however, one particular facet of police work that he did not like at all, breaking in rookies newly elevated to the detective squad.

Which, naturally, was the one assignment he invariably drew.

Di Lucca didn't know if Captain Hearn always paired him with the rookies because he was the senior member of the squad, and patient, and well-versed in police procedure; or if it was because the captain had a well-hidden streak of leprecaun-like Irish humor; or if it was that every man is supposed to bear a sometimes heavy cross. He only knew that he always drew the rookies, and that there was nothing he could do except to steel himself and make the best of it.

There were problems with every rookie. They were over-

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confident, or they were too nervous, or they were too eager, or they were just plain incompetent, like that cousin of the police commissioner with whom Di Lucca had spent three painful months the year before. There was always something new to face.

Take the young rookie, Tim Corcoran, with whom he had been paired for the past three weeks. The problem with Corcoran was not cockiness or nervousness or any lack of competence. Contrarily, he was a graduate of the Police Academy who had made two admittedly fortunate arrests of a major nature within six months of one another, sufficient to get him promoted to the detective squad. And although it had taken Di Lucca twelve years of pounding a beat, in the days when beats were still pounded, to make the same grade, he didn't in the least begrudge Corcoran's abrupt rise. These were changing times, and youth, if capable, had to be served.

Corcoran also wore modish clothes and had hair as long as the department would allow, plus an affinity for dark glasses and hard-rock music. That, too, was all right; Di Lucca was a progressive thinker, and two of his three sons had hair down to their rumps and wore beards and one of them was even trying to be a writer.

No, the trouble with this particular rookie, this Corcoran, was that he had an imagination.

There was nothing wrong with having an imagination, but Di Lucca thought you ought to be able to control it and to back it up with simple logic. Not so with Corcoran. He allowed this imagination of his to run wild, to the point where he forgot logic and some of the basic precepts of police work. Nothing was ever simple as far as Corcoran was concerned; there were always hidden meanings. The most routine squeals, which was all the two of them had handled thus far, became puzzles of magnitude in Corcoran's rampant imagination.

Di Lucca had tried patiently to teach him that investigative police work was really a pretty simple, ordinary kind of thing. Cases were solved by legwork and careful observation and time-tested procedures. Corcoran said he understood that, and went right on illogically overworking his imagination.

Sitting at his desk in the squad room early one Friday morning, near the end of their first week on the night trick, Di Lucca watched Corcoran poring over the unsolved files, something the rookie did every chance he got. He was thinking,

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Di Lucca was: all we need now is a murder case, one of those fancy ones where you've got suspects and clues and a crazy set of circumstances.

And so, of course, the telephone rang . . .

ON THEIR way to answer the squeal, Corcoran, who was driving the departmental sedan, said for the third time since they had left the squad room, "A murder, Rennie! We're finally going to investigate a murder."

Di Lucca sighed. "Don't sound so happy about it."

"I'm not happy, I'm a little nervous," Corcoran told him. He was tall and baby-faced, and had bright brown eyes behind his dark glasses and a lot of freckles that matched in color his stylishly shaggy hair. "The victim's name is Simon Warren, right?"

"That's what the guy on the phone, Prentiss, said."

"Is he somebody important?"

"Well, I never heard the name."

"The address is pretty important."

"I guess it is," Di Lucca admitted, and wished somebody else had taken the call, though it was inevitable that he and Corcoran would catch a murder squeal sooner or later. Still, he wished it had been later; and some place other than Lookout Point, which was the city's most fashionable district.

He sat slumped on the seat, waiting patiently for Corcoran to get them through the early-morning fog to Lookout Point —a short, plump man with a sad Italian face, a receding hairline, and enormous black eyes that were at once mild and shrewd. His suit, in contrast to Corcoran's mod-cut double-breasted, was ultra-conservative and hung badly on him. He had never been able to find an off-the-rack suit that fit him properly, and he couldn't afford to have one tailor-made, not with three sons, one of whom was trying to be a writer.

Corcoran was silent the remainder of the trip, for which Di Lucca was grateful, and finally they reached Lookout Point and located the address Di Lucca had been given on the phone.

The house was a huge Tudor with a gabled roof, set well back from the street on elevated ground and fronted by an acre of lawn landscaped with oak trees. A paved entrance drive climbed upward on the left.

They went up the drive, and it hooked into a loop in front of the house, circling a rectangle of lawn with a stone

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fountain in the middle. Parked at the far edge of the circle was a black-and-white cruiser, and two uniformed cops were standing there with a red-headed woman wearing a gray jersey dress. Corcoran pulled up next to the cruiser.

Di Lucca knew the uniformed cops, and one of them said, "We just got here, Sergeant. This is Miss Becky Hughes; she lives here."

Di Lucca introduced himself and Corcoran. Miss Hughes was in her mid-twenties, gray-eyed and abundantly endowed with female assets. Her red hair, worn flipped under, appeared to have been hastily combed; the red lacquer on her long nails was chipped, and one of the nail points had been broken or bitten off.

She said, "I was Simon Warren's—um, secretary. It certainly is a terrible thing, what happened."

Di Lucca nodded and asked, "Where would the deceased be?"

"Inside, in the library. Prentiss is with him." She shuddered. "He said he wanted to make sure nothing was disturbed."

"Anyone else in the house at the moment?"

"George Charon and Everett Finney."

"Who would they be?"

"Simon's nephews. They have different names because Simon had two sisters that died, you know?"

Di Lucca said, "I see. Do all of you live here?"

"Yes, we do."

"Uh-huh. Well, suppose you show us where the library is."

She said she would, and Di Lucca told one of the uniformed cops to remain there to wait for the lab crew; the other one went with them into the house, and across a wide foyer hung with silver-framed, antique mirrors, and down a corridor to one side.

Miss Hughes stopped before a set of double oak doors which had been pulled not quite together, leaving a six-inch gap between them.

"Here it is," she said. "But I don't want to go in there again, if it's all the same to you. I can't stand the sight of blood or dead people." She shuddered again. "I'll be in the parlor with George and Everett, okay? It's the other way off the foyer."

"All right, Miss Hughes."

She turned and walked away down the corridor. Corcoran, with his dark glasses off, and the uniformed cop watched her appreciatively. Di Lucca was looking at the doors and deciding that they had been forced open recently; a twisted piece of metal that was part of an

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inside bar-lock arrangement could be seen in the opening between the two halves.

Di Lucca told the uniformed cop to stay in the corridor. Then he knocked on one of the doors, said, "Police," loudly, and pushed it open. He and Corcoran went into the library.

It was a large room that looked as if it belonged in a Victorian English manor house. Floor to ceiling bookshelves covered two walls; damask drapery partially concealed a third, revealing at least one window; and a huge brick fireplace, with a rectangular brick hearth in front of it, comprised the fourth wall. There was a maroon carpet, two large Victorian chairs, a matching sofa, a polished-wood reading table with six leather-backed chairs, and ornate reading lamps and ceiling fixtures.

The dead man lay prone on the carpeting at a right angle to the fireplace hearth, just in front of it. One arm was outflung over his head, and there was a dark stain of blood spreading out from under his chest. He had been in his sixties. He wore a wine-colored dressing gown, slippers, a pair of striped pajamas.

A thin, fifty-ish man, white-haired, long-faced, wearing a black suit but no tie, had been sitting on the sofa. He stood up

as Di Lucca and Corcoran entered, and came stiffly toward them.

"Mr. Prentiss?" Di Lucca asked him.

"Yes, sir." Prentiss had a soft, sepulchral voice. "It was I who called you. I am—I *was* Mr. Warren's butler."

Di Lucca introduced himself and Corcoran, and then went to where the body lay and knelt down beside it. It was difficult to tell from the dead man's prone position, but it appeared that he had been shot in the chest—shot because that was what Prentiss had told him on the phone. There was nothing else to see just yet.

He straightened again. "Any-

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body touch or move the body?"

"No, sir," Prentiss answered.

"You were the one who found him. Is that right?"

"I was, yes."

Di Lucca looked at Corcoran, and saw with mild satisfaction that the rookie had his note pad out, pencil poised over it. He said, "Can you tell us what happened here, Mr. Prentiss?"

"I'll try, sir. I'm still somewhat in a state of shock." Prentiss was silent for a moment, then he went on, "I get up at six-thirty every morning. This morning I was dressing when I heard the report of the gun shots, so it must have been six-forty or thereabouts. I rushed out of my room on the second floor, came downstairs, and looked first in the parlor. I saw and heard nothing. Then I came to the library, and Mr. Warren was moaning behind the closed doors. I tried the doors, but they were locked. I was quite distraught, and I—well, I struck the doors several times with my shoulder until finally they burst open."

Di Lucca asked, "And Mr. Warren was lying where he is now, in front of the fireplace?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was he still alive when you reached him?"

"Barely alive," Prentiss said. "I started to turn him over, to see how badly he was injured, but then he spoke and I—"

"Spoke? He said something before he died?"

"Yes, sir. He said—well, it doesn't seem to make much sense but I distinctly heard the words: 'Pick up sticks'."

" 'Pick up sticks'?"

"I am quite positive those were his exact words, sir."

"Do you have any idea what he meant?"

"I've thought about it carefully, sir, and I can't imagine what significance the words could have."

Di Lucca glanced at Corcoran, who was no longer writing on his notepad; his face was eager and intensely thoughtful, and Di Lucca knew his imagination had begun working on 'pick up sticks'. He sighed inaudibly and said to Prentiss, "Did Mr. Warren say anything else?"

"No, sir. He died then. There was nothing I could do."

"What happened next?"

"There was quite a bit of confusion. Miss Hughes and Mr. Charon and Mr. Finney had arrived by then—they are the other members of the household—and everyone seemed to be speaking at once. I looked around the room, but I did not find the weapon which had killed Mr. Warren. I also exam-

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ined the windows, thinking that perhaps a burglar was responsible, but they were and are unbroken and securely locked. Then I telephoned—"

"Locked?" Corcoran interrupted. "Locked from the inside?"

"Yes, sir."

"And didn't you say all of the library doors were locked too?"

"Yes, sir, they were."

"Then Simon Warren was killed in a locked room!"

"I am afraid it would seem so," Prentiss said.

Corcoran's eyes were wide. "A locked room! A dying message!" He looked at Di Lucca. "Lord, Rennie!"

Yeah, Di Lucca thought. He said to Prentiss. "Was Mr. Warren in the habit of getting up as early as you do?"

"He was not. He usually arose at nine."

"Well, do you have any idea what he was doing here in the library so early?"

"No, sir. It's quite odd."

"What do you think happened here this morning?"

Prentiss' lips pursed. "I would imagine, sir, that since the room was locked, and since no one could have entered or left the premises who does not belong here, either Miss Hughes or Mr. Finney or Mr. Charon did it. That one of them, the guilty one, was not in bed at the time of the shooting."

"Would you say they all had reason to kill Simon Warren?"

"I would," Prentiss said firmly. "The same reason: money."

"Money?"

"Quite so. You see, Mr. Warren was something less than generous with his considerable assets."

"You mean he was tight?" Corcoran asked.

Prentiss looked at him distastefully. "Yes, if you prefer."

Di Lucca asked, "Where did the Warren money come from?"

"Antiques," Prentiss answered. "Until his retirement two years ago, Mr. Warren was quite a well-known dealer in antiques."

"I see. And you say there was some friction over money between Mr. Warren and the others who live here?"

"To put it mildly, sir. Miss Hughes, Mr. Warren's secretary, complained constantly that he paid very little salary and she has something of a penchant for fine clothes and expensive adornments. Mr. Finney is what was once termed a playboy, also with quite expensive tastes and little allowance with which to indulge them. Mr. Charon, unfortunately, is addicted to horse racing. Each of them

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wanted or needed money, and I'm quite sure, sir, that each of them was mentioned prominently in Mr. Warren's will."

"Are you also included in the will, Mr. Prentiss?"

"I believe so, sir," Prentiss said with dignity. "However, money has never been a particular consideration in my life—and with myself, at least, Mr. Warren was not ungenerous."

"Uh-huh. Well, do you know of any threats the others might have made against Mr. Warren's life?"

"Not in so many words, no, sir. At least not in my presence."

"Did anything happen last night—an argument, like that?"

"Not to my knowledge. It was quite a normal evening."

"Are there any guns in the house?"

"I believe Mr. Warren had one, sir, but I do not know where it is."

"Do any of the others own a gun?"

"As far as I'm aware, no, sir."

Prentiss had nothing else to tell them of import, and Di Lucca asked him to wait in the parlor with the others.

WHEN HE AND Di Lucca were alone, Corcoran said, "What do you make of all of it, Rennie? How do you figure the old man was murdered in a locked room? And what could 'pick up sticks' mean?"

"Now how would I know?" Di Lucca asked. "We only been here ten minutes."

"But a locked room, a cryptic message from a dying man, probably naming his killer. . ."

"Procedure, Corcoran," Di Lucca reminded him. "We're cops, remember. We got a procedure to follow."

"Sure, Rennie, but—"

"Come on, let's go over the room a little."

Di Lucca went first to the entrance doors and looked again at the bar-lock arrangement. The doors had obviously been fastened from the inside when Prentiss broke them open, and as far as he could see there was no way the bar could have been put in place from anywhere except the inside. Besides that, there was the time element; Prentiss had gotten to the library no more than a couple of minutes after the shooting.

He crossed to the damask drapery and examined the windows, which looked out on a flagstone terrace. They were locked, as Prentiss had said, and even when unlocked would not have opened far enough on short hinges to admit anyone larger than a child.

Di Lucca turned. There were

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no other doors in the room, no other windows, just the bookshelves and the fireplace and the furniture. He went to the shelves and saw that Simon Warren's library was extensive: classic novels, history, books on antiques, mythology, biography, philosophy. But there was nothing else to see; no hidden panels or strange contraptions or foolishness such as that.

Di Lucca realized Corcoran was no longer at his side, and pivoted away from the bookshelves. The rookie was on his hands and knees on the fireplace hearth, between a small stack of cordwood and an antique set of fire tools, peering up the chimney.

Wearily, Di Lucca crossed the room and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Looking up the chimney," Corcoran answered.

"Well, I can see that."

"Nothing up there but soot."

"What did you expect to be up there?"

"I don't know, I was checking. It's too narrow for a man to squeeze through, too."

Di Lucca was somewhat incredulous. "Did you think the murderer came down the chimney, shot the old man, and then went back up it again?"

"I was only trying to be thorough," Corcoran said defensively. "This is a locked-room mystery, and the answer has to be in here somewhere. I wonder—"

Di Lucca didn't want to know what he was wondering, and he was saved from immediately finding out by the sound of voices out in the corridor. There was a knock on the door. Di Lucca said, "What is it?" and the uniformed cop put his head through and announced that the lab crew had arrived. A moment later half a dozen men trooped in, carrying cameras and lab kits, and, in the case of the assistant medical examiner, a battered black doctor's bag.

Di Lucca conferred with the man in charge of the lab crew, Joe Dillon, and told him what kind of thing they apparently had; Dillon said that if there was something to be found in the library, they would find it. Then Di Lucca went out to the corridor and told the uniformed cop to get his partner and to search the grounds on the chance that the murder weapon had somehow been gotten out of the house.

The patrolman nodded and hurried away, and Di Lucca turned and saw that Corcoran was fiddling with the double entrance doors. He had pulled them nearly shut from inside

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the library, and was examining the bar-lock arrangement.

"Rennie," he said suddenly, "I think I found something."

He opened one of the doors and Di Lucca went in and said, "What is it?"

"Well, look at this door lock. It seems to have been kind of loose—I mean, even before Prentiss broke the doors open. Here, I'll show you what I mean; I'll go out in the corridor and you close the doors and hold the bar-lock in place."

He went into the hallway, and Di Lucca shut the doors and held the bar-lock across them. Corcoran pressed against the doors from without, and even with the pressure Di Lucca was applying, the two halves parted slightly. The rookie's left eye was visible in the small vertical opening.

"You see, Rennie?" he asked.

Di Lucca opened the doors again. "See what?"

"What could have happened. The murderer could have pressed against the doors just like I did, until they parted that half inch or so. Then he could have wedged a gun into the crack, peered along the sight, and shot old man Warren there in the library: you can see the body from the door; it's on a direct line. Murder in a locked room!"

Di Lucca said patiently, "Why?"

"Why? Why what?"

"Why would the murderer want to kill Warren that way? Why would the old man be locked in the library at six-thirty in the morning in the first place? Why would the killer be skulking about in the corridor with a gun? And why aren't there any gouges or scrapes in the wood edges of the doors, which there would be if a gun was wedged between them?"

"Oh," Corcoran said.

"Come on," Di Lucca told him, "it's time we went and had a talk with the two nephews and Miss Becky Hughes."

They left the library and started down the corridor. Corcoran said meditatively, "One two, buckle my shoe; three-four, shut the door."

Di Lucca looked at him. "What was that?"

"The old nursery rhyme. You know: five-six, pick up sticks."

"Nursery rhymes," Di Lucca said.

"Well, I'm trying to concentrate on that angle now. 'Pick up sticks' has got to mean something, doesn't it?"

"If Prentiss was telling the truth, it does."

They reached the door to the parlor, and entered—and Di

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Lucca felt as if he had stepped more than a hundred years into the past. It was furnished in a combination of styles: ranging from New Gothic to Biedermeier, circa 1850, with paneled oak walls and furniture in a variety of polished woods.

There was a buffet that was mahogany veneer on pine, covered by a tapestried black cloth; a walnut sofa upholstered in blue brocade, with matching chairs; oak end tables. White cotton curtains were on the windows, and the carpeting was blue chenille. In one wall was a fireplace that had a beige marble mantelpiece and a tinted mirror above it, and an embroidered birch firescreen in front of it. A crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling.

Corcoran took it all in a little disbelievingly, and Miss Hughes, who was sitting on one end of the sofa, said, "It kind of throws you at first, doesn't it? Simon—Mr. Warren—loved antiques, and every room in the house is, you know, a different period."

Di Lucca was looking at the two men who sat on the matching walnut chairs. One of them was dark-haired and handsome, dressed in a suede jacket and doeskin slacks; the hair was wavy and fashionably long, as were his sideburns and his Continental-style mustache. The other man had sandy hair, pale blue eyes, a petulant mouth, and agitated hands; he wore a polo shirt and brown slacks.

Both of them stood up and the dark-haired one said, "I'm Everett Finney. You'd be Lieutenant Di Lucca, right?"

"Sergeant Di Lucca."

"Oh, sorry. This is my cousin, George Charon."

"How do you do," Charon said.

Di Lucca introduced Corcoran. Finney asked. "Have you found out anything yet about Uncle Simon's death?"

"We're still investigating," Di Lucca told him noncommittally. "Have you and your cousin and Miss Hughes been here together since the shooting?"

"More or less," Finney answered. "We went to our respective rooms to dress while Prentiss was calling you people, and then met here a few minutes later."

"Did any of you leave the house for any reason?"

Finney and Charon shook their heads, and Miss Hughes said, "Well, I went out to meet those nice uniformed officers when they got here, but nowhere else."

"All right," Di Lucca said. "Now what I'd like to do is ask each of you some questions—individually, if you don't mind.

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Is there some place private that's close at hand?"

Prentiss, who was standing regimentally by the curtained windows, wearing an expression of hostility directed at the other members of the household, indicated a closed door at the far side of the parlor. "In there is a small sitting room, sir."

"Thanks." With Corcoran at his heels, Di Lucca crossed to the door and opened it; the sitting room, being more or less a part of the parlor, was furnished similarly if less luxuriantly. He pivoted in the doorway and said, "Miss Hughes?"

She sighed and stood up and went into the sitting room. Di Lucca shut the door and invited her to sit down on the blue brocade loveseat along one wall.

"Now then, Miss Hughes," Di Lucca began, "suppose we start with your whereabouts at the time of the shooting."

"I was in bed."

"On the second floor?"

"Yes, my room is next door to Simon's—Mr. Warren's—down at the end."

"You heard the shots?"

"I sure did. It sounded like cannons going off."

"What did you do?"

"Well, I didn't know what it was. I was still half asleep. Then I heard Prentiss running downstairs, and pretty soon some banging sounds, and I put on my negligee thing and ran down there. Prentiss and George and Everett were all there in the library, with poor Simon on the floor, dead and everything. I almost fainted when I saw the blood."

"Did you see Finney or Charon before you went into the library, hear them on the stairs?"

"I heard somebody run down just after Prentiss, but I didn't see who it was."

"Only one person?"

"Maybe two. I was still half asleep."

"Did Prentiss tell you what Mr. Warren said before he died?"

"Oh, that 'pick up sticks' thing? I don't know what Simon meant by that. Isn't Pick Up Sticks a game for kids or something?"

Di Lucca said, "Do you have any idea who murdered Mr. Warren? Or why?"

"No. How could it have happened in a locked room like that? I don't understand it at all."

"You don't think Mr. Warren's two nephews were involved?"

"Everett and George? Gosh, I don't know. They're both awfully sweet. Maybe Prentiss did it."

"Why do you say that?"

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"I don't like him very much," she said. "He's pretty snooty."

"I see. We understand there's been some friction about money. Is that right?"

"Oh, sure, I guess so. Simon was a real penny-pincher. I had to practically beg on my hands and knees for a new dress, or for a tiny little raise in my salary."

"What about Finney and Charon?"

"Well, Simon was always telling them they were a couple of spongers and that as long as they didn't want to work for a living, they'd have to be content with what he gave them to live on. He could be real mean at times, Simon could."

"Did Finney or Charon ever threaten him?"

"Threaten? You mean, say they'd kill him?"

"That's what I mean."

"I don't think so. They were always shouting at Simon, and he was always shouting at them, and I never paid much attention. I guess one of them could have."

"Do either of them own a gun?"

"A gun? I never saw a gun anywhere around here."

Di Lucca said that would be all for the moment, and asked Miss Hughes to send Everett Finney in. She went out, and

after a time Finney entered the sitting room and sat where Miss Hughes had, on the loveseat; he appeared relaxed.

"I suppose you want to know where I was when my uncle was murdered," he said.

"To begin with, Mr. Finney."

"Like everybody except Prentiss and my uncle, and the murderer, I was in bed. Six-thirty in the morning is an ungodly hour. Anyway, the shots woke me up. I got out of bed and put a robe on, and Prentiss was making a lot of noise running downstairs and shouting. When I got to the library, the doors were open and Prentiss was kneeling on the floor beside my uncle."

"Did you see Miss Hughes or your cousin?"

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"No. I was the first one down after Prentiss, and George and Becky came into the library after I did."

"What do you think happened?"

"I can't honestly say. I suppose, though, since the room was locked, that either George or Becky killed him. How it was done I have no idea. Pretty clever, though, that locked-room business."

"Why do you suppose one of them is guilty?"

"This was hardly a happy household, sergeant," Finney said. "None of us got along particularly well with Uncle Simon, except Prentiss. The reason we didn't get along with him was because he horded his damned money like a miser and none of us exactly is used to the life of a pauper."

"Did you have trouble with your uncle about money?"

"Naturally. But I'd hardly kill him over it. After all, he didn't have too many years left and I have the idea that we're all mentioned in his will. He had no one else to leave his money to, after all. George and Becky are greedier than I am, and less patient."

"I see."

"Sorry if I seem callous. You'd have had to know my uncle to understand the lack of grief. And of course there's the money. I freely admit to liking that much more than I liked the old man."

"What do you think your uncle's dying words mean?"

" 'Pick up sticks'? I haven't the slightest. Maybe he was delirious, or Prentiss misunderstood him."

"Do you own a gun, Mr. Finney?"

"Certainly not. What possible use could I have for a gun?"

"Did you ever see a gun anywhere around the house?"

"No. If anyone has one, they've kept it well hidden."

Di Lucca asked Finney a few more questions, learned nothing, and dismissed him. When he had gone through the door, to summon George Charon, Corcoran frowned and muttered, "Five-six, pick up sticks. Five-six, five-six."

"Are you still reciting nursery rhymes?" Di Lucca asked him.

"There's something about five-six, Rennie." He scowled deeply, and then his face brightened and he snapped his fingers. "Sure!"

"Now what?"

"Five-six, what are five-six, Rennie?"

"Numbers," Di Lucca said, frowning.

"Sure, numbers, but what else?"

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"This is no time for guessing games, son."

"Five-six, the fifth and sixth letters of the alphabet."

"So?"

"Everett Finney," Corcoran said. "E and F, the fifth and sixth letters of the alphabet! Rennie, maybe Warren was trying to name Finney as his murderer when he said 'pick up sticks'."

Oh boy, Di Lucca thought. Patiently he said, "Now come on, Corcoran. You really think a dying man is going to be thinking up cryptograms to name his killer? Why wouldn't he just say 'Finney'?"

"Who knows how the mind of a dying man works? Besides, he didn't say 'Finney' or 'Charon' or any other name; he said 'pick up sticks'."

"Yeah," Di Lucca admitted. "Evidently he did."

GEORGE CHARON came in then and took his place on the loveseat. His hands moved in their agitated way over the legs of his trousers. His story was substantially the same as Miss Hughes' and Finney's: he had been in bed at the time of the killing; he had been awakened by the shots. He had pulled on a robe and come downstairs to find Prentiss and Finney standing over the body of his uncle. He did not own a gun, was in fact afraid of the things, and knew of no weapons in the house. He had no idea how Simon Warren had been murdered in a locked room, and he had no idea what 'pick up sticks' meant.

When Di Lucca asked him if he cared to offer an opinion as to who the murderer was, Charon said without hesitation, "My cousin, Everett Finney."

"You sound pretty positive, Mr. Charon."

"Who else could it have been? Becky Hughes is beautiful but much too stupid to pull off a locked-room murder. Prentiss was devoted to the old man. Nobody else could have gotten in or out of the house. And I sure as hell didn't do it. That leaves Everett."

"Did you see or hear him run downstairs after the shooting, as he claims to have done?"

"I don't recall hearing him—probably because he was already downstairs, after shooting Uncle Simon."

"Was there any special bad feeling between Finney and your uncle?"

"Nothing special. They just generally despised one another. I often wondered why Uncle Simon didn't throw Everett out of the house. But he believed strongly in looking after family, so he allowed him to stay and paid his way, such as it was.

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Everett was always demanding more money to spend on women and nightclubs and fancy clothes."

"You didn't have any quarrels with your uncle, Mr. Charon? The same type of quarrels over money?"

Charon lowered his eyes. "Well, yes, I suppose I did. I'll have to admit that Uncle Simon was hardly a generous man."

"You follow the horse races. Is that right?"

"Who told you that?" Charon demanded angrily.

"Is it true?"

"Well, what if it is? A man has to have some kind of hobby."

"Has yours been a successful one?"

"Oh, I've lost a few dollars. I don't deny that. And I owe a little bit of money at the moment, nothing major. I could have used an extra thousand or two. But that doesn't mean I killed my uncle to get it."

There was nothing more to be learned from George Charon, and Di Lucca sent for Prentiss. He questioned the butler again, extensively, but aside from making it obvious that he did not like or approve of Miss Hughes, Everett Finney, or George Charon, Prentiss had nothing further of significance to offer.

In the parlor once again, Di Lucca said, "I'll probably want to talk to all of you again later on, so don't plan on going anywhere for a while. In fact, I'd appreciate it if you'd all wait right here in the parlor until Mr. Warren's body is removed and the laboratory people are finished."

Prentiss nodded, Miss Hughes sighed, Finney shrugged, and Charon looked irritated, but none of them said anything. Di Lucca and Corcoran left the parlor and returned to the library. The lab crew was still going over the room. The body of Simon Warren was lying as it had been earlier, although the assistant ME would have turned it to make a preliminary examination; a chalk outline anhad been drawn on the carpet around it.

The lab chief, Dillon, said, "We haven't turned up anything at all so far, Rennie—nothing that would explain how the murder was committed in a locked room. And no sign of the murder weapon."

"Anything else we can use?"

"A mass of fingerprints, most of them smudges. We vacuumed the carpet and the hearth, and we'll sift through the bag downtown. That's about it up to now, I'm afraid."

Di Lucca turned to the assistant ME. "Doc?"

"Victim was shot twice in

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the chest with what was likely a small caliber weapon. That's all I can tell you until I do a post."

Di Lucca nodded and went over to stand by the entrance doors, to wait until the crew was finished. Corcoran began to prowl the room, tapping walls, examining the bookshelves, looking, apparently, for hidden panels.

After a time Corcoran took notice of the books themselves, peering at the titles on the spines as he walked along. Then he stopped and peered harder at a particular section. He took one book off the shelf, opened it, studied it, and put it back; then he removed another, and a third. His eyes began to glitter, and he said, "Damn!" softly.

Di Lucca glanced over at him, and Corcoran hurried up to him and said, "Old man Warren had a pretty large collection of books on mythology. Did you notice that, Rennie?"

"More or less," Di Lucca answered without much interest.

"Greek, Roman and pagan mythology," Corcoran said. "Particularly Greek."

"All right," Di Lucca said patiently, "you've got another idea. Let's hear it."

"Well, it might sound a little far-fetched at first, but it all fits. Greek mythology is the key, and Warren was obviously pretty well versed on Greek mythology. I don't know much about it myself, but I remember a couple of things from when I was in school—"

"Never mind the buildup, son."

"Okay, then. Including the butler, we've got four suspects, right? Well, let's take a look at George Charon for a minute. He pronounces his name Char-on, doesn't he?"

"Stop asking rhetorical questions," Di Lucca told him mildly, "and get on with it."

"Char-on," Corcoran repeated. "But there's another way to pronounce that name: K-ron. K-ron."

Di Lucca just looked at him.

"In Greek mythology," Corcoran went on excitedly. "Charon is the ferryman of Hades, the one who takes the newly arrived dead across the river to hell!"

Di Lucca kept on looking at him.

"Don't you get it?" Corcoran asked.

"No," Di Lucca said.

"That river is called *Styx*, the River Styx. Pick up . . . *Styx!* Pick up . . . Charon. George Charon, Rennie, Warren was trying to tell Prentiss that George Charon was his killer!"

"My God," Di Lucca said, not without reverence.

"It fits, Rennie, it all fits."

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"At least one thing doesn't fit."

"What's that?"

"Well, use your head, Corcoran. It's the same thing that was wrong with your other idea: it's illogical. A dying man is not going to be thinking up riddles involved K-ron and the River Styx to name his killer. He's just not going to do it, Corcoran."

"But Rennie—"

The lab man, Dillon, came over then—to Di Lucca's relief—and said, "We're finished, Rennie. We've been over everything. If there's anything here we can't find it."

"Okay, Joe, thanks."

The two uniformed patrolmen came in and reported that they had searched the grounds without finding any sign of a gun. Dillon said, "You want us to have a look at the rest of the downstairs, Rennie?"

"Yeah. Corcoran and I will probably take the people here up to the second floor pretty soon, and go through the rooms up there. The murder weapon has got to be in this house somewhere."

The assistant ME joined them. "All right if we take the body away now, Rennie?"

Di Lucca looked over at the body of Simon Warren, as he had been doing until Corcoran interrupted him, and gnawed the inside of his cheek. He said, "You know, there's something about him that bothers me and I'm not sure yet what it is. Another fifteen or twenty minutes, if it's okay with you."

The assistant ME shrugged. "You're in charge. I'll tell the ambulance boys you'll call them when you're ready."

"Right."

The lab crew and the assistant ME filed out, taking the uniformed cops with them. Corcoran said, "What bothers you about the corpse, Rennie? Maybe it'd help if you talked it over."

"There's nothing to talk about. It's just a feeling I got. Look, Corcoran, why don't you go into the parlor and watch your ferryman from Hades?"

Corcoran appeared hurt. "I still think that's a possibility."

"Sure, it's a possibility. Now go on, will you, I want to be alone here for a few minutes."

"What are you going to do?"

"Go, son, go."

Corcoran went, not happily.

FIFTEEN MINUTES later Di Lucca came out of the library, found Joe Dillon and two of his men, and told them they didn't need to go over any more of the house.

"The answer," he said, "is all in the library."

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Dillon was surprised. "This I've got to see."

"Go on in there," Di Lucca said. "I'll be along in a minute."

He went across the foyer and into the parlor. Corcoran was standing by the birch fire screen, and the four members of the Warren household were sitting silently, apart from one another, around the room.

"I'd like everyone to come into the library with me," Di Lucca said.

Corcoran looked attentive. George Charon asked, "What for?"

"I'll explain pretty soon. Come along now."

They all left the parlor and proceeded into the library, where Dillon and the other members of the lab crew were standing around looking either skeptical or anticipatory. Miss Hughes saw that the body of Simon Warren was still on the carpet, shuddered, and said, "Why haven't you taken him away?"

"Pretty soon now," Di Lucca told her. "Suppose you all sit over there on the sofa."

They trooped to the sofa obediently, and Corcoran stepped up to Di Lucca and whispered, "What is it, Rennie? Did you find out something?"

Di Lucca sighed, pretended not to have heard him, and went to stand behind the body.

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All eyes were on him, and he felt vaguely foolish, being on stage like that; but this was the simplest way to do things, and hopefully the most productive. He cleared his throat.

"Now then," he said, "what we got here, we supposedly have a locked-room mystery. Only it isn't."

"It isn't?" Corcoran said.

"No, it isn't," Di Lucca told him patiently. "We also got a dying message, and that's authentic enough but not the way my partner here seems to think. What he thinks, Simon Warren was trying to name his killer directly; but that's not what he was trying to do at all."

"It isn't?" Corcoran said.

"No, it isn't," Di Lucca told him patiently. He glanced over at the butler. "We'll take the dying message first. Mr. Prentiss, how did Simon Warren say those last words of his—'pick up sticks'?"

Prentiss was puzzled. "How did he say them, sir?"

"Well, what I mean, did he say them just like that: 'Pick up sticks'? Or did he say: 'Pick. . . up. . .sticks', with a pause between any of the words?"

Prentiss worried his lower lip. "I believe he said the words without a pause, sir."

"Except maybe at the end?"

"At the end?"

"Like this: 'Pick up sticks. . .', with his voice sort of trailing off."

"Why, yes, now that I think of it."

"So maybe 'pick up sticks' wasn't all he was trying to say. Maybe there were some other words, a sentence, and he died before he could get the rest of it out."

Charon, Finney, and Miss Hughes were leaning forward now, listening intently. Finney asked, "What other words could he have wanted to say?"

"That's not too difficult to figure out, when you look at the way he's lying there on the floor. That position has bothered me for some time, something about it."

"What?" Corcoran said. "I don't see anything unusual."

"Well, look at his right arm," Di Lucca said. "You see the way it's outflung? Now that's not an unnatural position for a dead man, but if you want to think about it another way, it could also be that he's pointing at something, right?"

Everyone stared at the dead man, and at the outflung right arm, and at what it could be pointing at.

"The fireplace," Dillon, the lab man, said.

"Not exactly, Joe. Something on the hearth."

"The stack of cordwood?"

"Where the cordwood was

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before your boys moved it. Right?"

"Sticks!" Corcoran exploded. "Sticks!"

Di Lucca gave him a tolerant look. "That's it, Corcoran. What Simon Warren was trying to say was: 'Pick up sticks of cordwood'."

Dillon said, "But there's nothing there, Rennie, you can see that. I moved the stack myself when we vacuumed the hearth."

"There's something there, all right. The murder weapon, among other things. But it's pretty carefully concealed and you wouldn't have expected anything like it in the first place. Besides, you can't see it unless you get down close to it."

Di Luca moved around the body and stepped onto the hearth and knelt at the spot where the cordwood had been originally. His fingers probed at the cracks between several of them, where earlier he had found wedged a tiny bit of evidence that even the vacuuming had failed to dislodge. Then he tugged lightly, activating a spring—and four bricks, fastened together on their underside by a hinged metal plate to form a kind of door, swung upward. There was now a squarish opening in the hearth.

Corcoran moved quickly next to Di Lucca, and peered into the open space. "A floor safe," he said wonderingly. "The door to a floor safe."

Di Lucca looked at the wide-eyed quartet on the sofa. He said, "Mr. Prentiss, you told me you didn't know where your employer kept his ready cash and his valuables—and maybe his gun."

"No, sir, I didn't know. I had no idea there was a safe in the fireplace hearth. I'm quite amazed."

"What about the rest of you?"

They shook their heads.

"Well, that's a pretty clever hiding place for a safe, all right," Di Lucca went on; "the kind of place a man who knew a lot about antiques and antique methods would choose—and also the kind of place a man who didn't trust most members of his household would choose. But it wasn't quite clever enough. What happened here is fairly obvious now: The murderer learned of the safe somehow, and got ahold of the keys to open it; it's one of those key-lock types. He came in here this morning to riffle it, and Mr. Warren also came in for some reason we'll find out later and caught the killer with the safe open. The murderer panicked and shot

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Warren with Warren's gun, which was and no doubt still is inside the safe."

"But the locked room," Corcoran said. "How did the killer get out and lock the doors from the inside?"

"Like I said before," Di Lucca told him, "this isn't any locked-room mystery. It didn't figure to be one from the beginning. For one thing, Simon Warren was shot twice and the gun was nowhere to be found; that obviously rules out suicide. So what's the point in making a locked-room mystery out of it, from the killer's standpoint? Murder is murder, and he was sure to be one of the suspects in the investigation. If he had set out to commit murder in a locked room, he'd shoot Warren once, put the gun in the dead man's hand, and let suicide be the natural verdict. No, what this was, it was a spur-of-the-moment thing, an improvisation, and not a particularly brilliant or original one at that."

"Rennie, you still haven't explained the locked room."

"It's simple," Di Lucca said. "What the killer did, he shot Warren in his panic, and then realized the shots would bring the others down almost immediately. He couldn't rush out of the library for fear of being seen, so he did the next best thing to prevent immediate discovery: he ran over and locked the doors.

"Now he had bought himself a few seconds of time. So he came back to the safe, dropped the gun inside, closed the door, lowered the bricks, and put the cordwood back in place in a hurry.

"Later, he could come back, he thought, and remove the gun and the valuables. Well, by this time Prentiss was banging on the doors, and all the murderer did was to go over there and get behind them. Prentiss broke the doors open, and ran to the body; his full attention was on Simon Warren, and so was that of the others who rushed in shortly afterward. Warren had seen the killer put the gun back into the safe—maybe without wiping off his fingerprints; but dying as he was, he apparently didn't see where the murderer had gone. As a result, he tried to tell Prentiss where the safe and the gun were.

"As for the murderer, he waited behind the door half until everybody else was in the library, and then came out last, as if he too had come running downstairs. Which means that there's only one person who could be guilty, and that's the last person into the library. And just to clinch it: The killer told me the sound of the shots was

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like cannons going off, but a small caliber gun triggered inside this room wouldn't make that much noise, especially to someone supposedly in bed on the second floor rear. And finally, I found wedged into the door bricks a tiny broken fingernail point, a red-lacquered fingernail—Corcoran!"

The rookie managed to close his mouth long enough to grab and hang onto the bitterly struggling Becky Hughes before she could get out through the library doors.

IN LIGHT OF the evidence against her, Miss Hughes confessed to the murder of Simon Warren, substantiating evey-thing Di Lucca had postulated. She also revealed that she had discovered she was not, after all, included in Warren's will; that, combined with the old man's stinginess, had decided her to commit theft and then to disappear to another part of the country. She had learned of the safe by spying on Warren, and had pilfered the keys to open it from his room that very morning.

But Warren had awakened as she was leaving, had followed her covertly downstairs, and had caught her at the open safe. He threatened her with police action as well as expulsion from the house, and the threat had been responsible for her panic and for the shooting. As Everett Finney said, she was not nearly as dumb as he had pretended to be but she was every bit as ignorant.

A matron was summoned; and Joe Dillon, having gotten the keys from where Miss Hughes had returned them to the ring in Simon Warren's bedroom—while Charon and Finney were dressing—opened the safe and found the murder gun and lifted two clear latent prints off of it. When the matron and Becky Hughes left together, Corcoran and Di Lucca trailed the pack in the departmental sedan.

Corcoran kept looking at Di Lucca with open admiration, and finally he said, "Man, you were great back there, Rennie. Brilliant!"

Di Lucca shrugged self-effacingly. "It was police work, Corcoran," he said. "Observation, recall, addition of facts, procedure. Plain and simple police work."

"And imagination," Corcoran said. "You really used your imagination, Rennie."

Di Lucca released a soft breath, slid down on the seat, and closed his eyes. *Rookies*, he thought wearily. *What did I ever do to deserve the rookies?*

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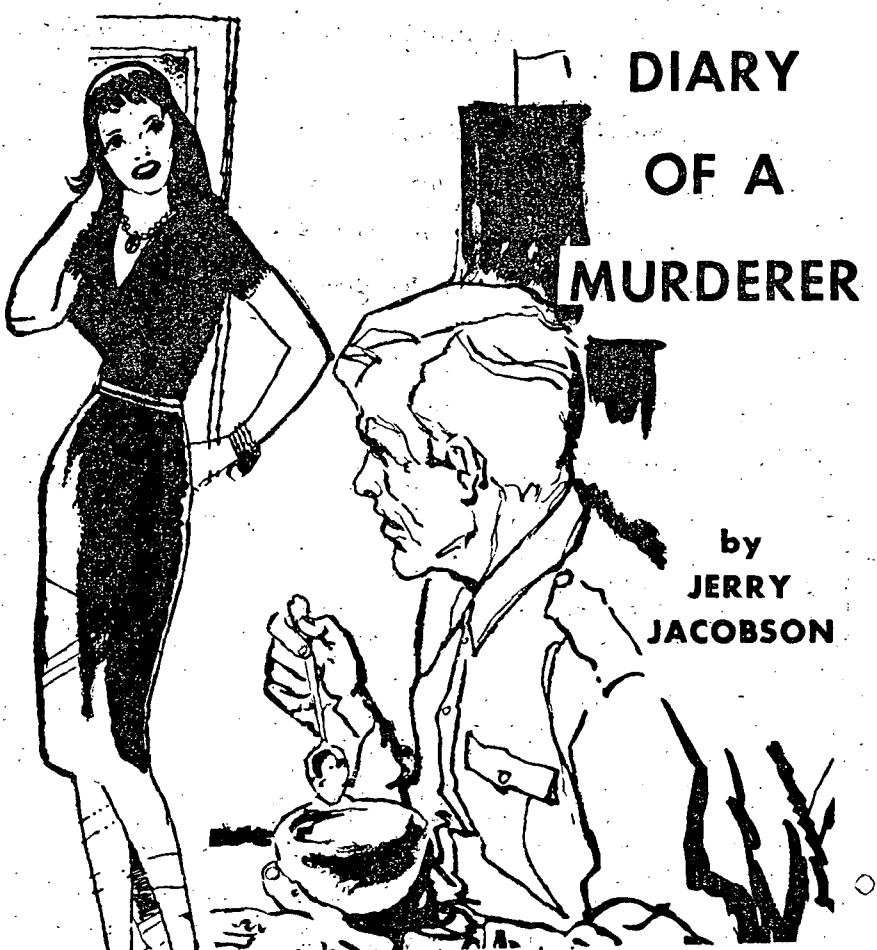

DIARY OF A MURDERER

by JERRY JACOBSON

THOUGH IT might be a dangerous miscalculation, I've come to the decision to record these last days with my brother Gordon in diary form. I am a precise sort of man in all things, from my receipts and records at the store to my letters and bills at home and I need a record of some sort.

Even if it be used in fatal evidence against me should my

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He was my flesh and blood, my brother—my deadly enemy. He had taken my woman, my life, my every joy. But I had one last pleasure to look forward to—the moment he died at my hands...

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plan go awry, this craven need for a private record of my every thought and act is a need to which I must relent. To you, who shall bear silent witness to the events leading up to my brother's murder, I do apologize.

Tuesday, April 20: I have decided the manner in which my brother Gordon shall die. It will be a bomb—not an elaborate kind because things with moving parts and electrical circuits have always smelled the fear in me and have rebeled against my ineptitude. Toasters spit back at me. And my ten-year old sports car snickers at me by clacking its pistons by way of saying it shall wait until we two are where no other humans can help and then will pull a wire attached to one of its vital organs. So it shall be a bomb.

Wednesday, April 21: After work today I went directly to the New York Public Library, which is just around the corner from the apartment. I share it with my brother Gordon and with Cory, my full-grown St. Bernard of uncertain parentage.

It is easy to become lost in the New York Public Library. But it is also equally easy to lose oneself in it. I spent nearly two hours in the Electrical Engineering section and one hour in the Technology section and my presence went almost entirely without notice.

I looked directly into the eyes of so many people: librarians, shelvers, people from all walks of life there in the library for all of their various educational reasons. And not one of them will ever recall me; nor will they recall the fact that for a brief instant in time, they stared into the eyes of a smallish, slender man in a trim, fashionable suit who would soon be a murderer.

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For those three hours I took copious notes and detailed several diagrams of quite good detail and precision. As I worked it struck me that I could have been good at designing or drafting had I not chosen to spend my life's work on the selling of men's accessories in department stores around New York.

In my choosing of a profession, I admit that I have not shown much imagination. Part of the blame for that lack of imagination and success can be laid directly on me, but for part of it, the city of New York is responsible. New York has a way of pressing down upon a man with its concrete and steel, a way of making him deaf to his dreams and desires with its unceasing noise. In fact, if I am to be apprehended for Gordon's murder, I likely shall charge the city of New York as an accessory before and after the fact of my murder. But I should not like to be my lawyer and have to try to prove such a thing.

I did not make the mistake of checking out the books which lent me the support in the construction of my bomb. Books checked out from a public library can be traced back to their borrower. You see how precise and infallibly I am thinking? That precision and infallibility will make the murder of my brother Gordon one of the few truly perfect murders in the annals of crime.

Upon leaving the library, I went to Korvette's on Fifth Avenue. Nearly anything can be purchased there and at discount prices. I once worked there for a time in men's accessories. I have been in men's accessories for twenty-eight years and have not missed a day of work, even between job changes. I venture I am the steadiest, most reliable worker New York City has. The women I have dated have almost to a woman stated that those qualities are my finest. Steadiness and reliability.

You will note that the virtues of sexual attraction, desirability, or worldliness do not rank especially high. That is no matter. Throughout my life I have always known myself and my limitations.

I digress. At Korvette's I purchased an alarm clock, and three feet of wiring. What store clerk could think anything of these but that I was a heavy sleeper, and intended to hang some pictures?

Thursday, April 22: This afternoon, after work again, I laid plans to purchase the final two ingredients for my bomb, its detonator and six sticks of Trojan stumping dynamite.

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In the beginning this was not an easy matter; until my mind began to consider who used dynamite most frequently. Yes, of couse, gangsters used dynamite most frequently. The New York newspaper continually spread across their pages in blood the news of the demolition of an automobile and its unbeknownst driver, the redecoration in shambles of a mobster's home, the concussion reminder to a shopowner that he had fallen behind in his insurence. Yes, to obtain dynamite without the slightest suspicion falling upon me, it was clear that I would have to consort with gangsters.

Friday, April 23: Today Spring burst full-fledged upon the city. Gordon's bed has been unslept in, which on the morning of a previous Friday night is not unusual for Gordon. Gordon is one to whom New York's night life appeals like a giddy moth to the flame. On these weekends alone I sometimes go to St. Patrick's and light a candle. Not for Gordon. For the eternal flame of the city's night life which has kept him out of my sight and life.

At eleven I drove to a city in New Jersey which, for its relationship to strong criminal elements, shall remain nameless. At a pizza parlor I had conversation with a Mr. Blaster Borodeski, who put me in contact with a man known only as The Firefly in a cubicle in a savings and loan office, who entreated me to go to Vanduchi Construction Supply Company, at 225 South Suffolk Road.

Convinced that my intentions were completely dishonorable, Mr. Vanduchi sold me six sticks of Trojan stumping dynamite and a detonator cap, the total price for which was, as Mr. Vanduchi put it, "two U.S. Grants and two Andrew Jacksons"—$140. I was informed that the price was not so exorbitant when it was considered that the state's registration requirements for the purchase of dynamite had been circumvented. I had to agree with him.

Saturday, April 24: Gordon is still on his weekend of charming the Big Apple out of its tree, which has given me plenty of time to construct my bomb in my bedroom in private. Well, not strict privacy, for throughout its construction and implantation in an attache case, Cory has been observing my actions with his amber tail wagging in excitement and his big, lummox head tilted in perplexion i.e., he's excited but he doesn't really know what he's excited about.

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I think I ought to make some attempt at presenting the physical layout of our apartment building, because that geography will play an important role in the murder of Gordon.

We live in the Hellingforth Apartments on Sixth Avenue, between W. 39 Street and W. 40th Street. It is a six-floor building which overlooks Bryant Park, a favorite midcity park for children, oldsters and lovers.

Our unit is a four-room apartment, Apt. 601. Next to us, in Apt. 602, lives Mr. Bennett. He is a swing-shift aircraft mechanic at John F. Kennedy Airport, a widower and a fanatic New York Knicks fan. On our opposite side, in Apt. 600, there is no tenant. This unit is now used as a storage room, built by Mr. Mishkin, the superintendent. Inside, it is itself partitioned into cubicles with heavy-duty padlocks, in which each tenant in the building stores personal belongings. This room, while not occupied by a regular tenant, nevertheless figures prominently in my plans, as you shall see later.

In Apt. 603, on the other side of Mr. Bennett, resides Miss Priscilla Ivy. She is the head of the Records and Tapes Department of the New York Public Library, whose path I did not cross on Thursday while gathering information there for the construction of my bomb.

Miss Ivy is a bit too tall and a trifle too bony of limb to be considered a woman of real beauty. But she is a neat, precise and affable woman and a cook of some renown, specializing in Chinese cookery. Dishes at which she is particularly adept would have to be her Dem Sem, which consists of tiny dumplings stuffed with meat and seasonings and her Plien Kuo Ba, made of sauteed chicken, rice, ham and snow peas. And I must not forget her recipe for Sweet and Sour Sea Bass, which I have come to learn is served only in a handful of New York's better Chinese restaurants.

Also needing mention here is Miss Gigi Schwartz, who does not live in our building, but who figures prominently in my motive for murder. Miss Schwartz is employed in the Cosmetics Department at Macy's. We were once engaged to be married. She visits here often. No, not to visit me. To visit Gordon. On these very painful occasions I am required to take Cory out for a ten-mile walk.

Also, brief mention should be made of the tenants living on the floor beneath, for my

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humane concern for them in the matter of my bomb. Only Gordon figures in my hatred. No others figure in the narrow scope of my revenge. At the moment of my bomb's hideous detonation, I want no innocent lives claimed. That eternal trip down to the blast furnaces of hell is reserved for only one mortal.

Directly below us, in Apt. 501, live Luigi and Tina Barbetta, two pleasant, raucous Italians. Luigi operates the bocce-ball court at Fellini's Restaurant and Bocce on Bleeker Street in Greenwich Village. Tina Bargetta is a hair stylist at a nearby beauty school in West Broadway. Both work days.

Below Mr. Bennett, in Apt. 502, is a new tenant known only to me by his mailbox name, R. OWENS. Something of his habits and routine must be learned. I wish no innocent lives lost.

Apartment 503 is vacant. Apartment 500, located directly beneath the sixth floor storage room, is a supply room and workshop. In it, Morey Mishkin, the super, can occasionally be found mixing paints, repairing locks and threading plumbing pipe.

It is at this point that I may as well satisfy your curiosity, as to why I am so maniacally bent

on the murder of my brother Gordon. Is my hatred for him justified? Is such a brutal, final act really necessary?

For the answer to these questions, some background must be presented.

It has been said that two can live as cheaply as one. That adage holds true only so long as the two involved are employed. Gordon has not been employed for six years. Up to that time he was engaged in a number of enterprises of short duration and little success.

For a time in the late fifties, he did door-to-door selling in the Manhattan area. To even the most casual observer, this would appear to be an ideal job. Because of the compactedness of apartment buildings, thousands of potential customers were within arm's reach of each

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other, and correspondingly, of Gordon. All with the same human needs and the same New York aversion to going out for something when it can as easily be brought to them.

Then why wasn't Gordon able to make a success at such a painless form of work, you ask? For one reason and one reason only. He took things, slipped them into his sample cases. To Gordon selling was only a sideline. Carpeting was only useful as a product when he could measure the floor space of a bedroom where resided jewel boxes and bureau drawers and closets. He consented to sell vacuum cleaners only because their noise during a living room demonstration could cover the noise as he ransacked desks and cabinets for objects of value while the demonstratee was out of the room.

It should be mentioned here that while Gordon and I are not twins and indeed were born four years apart, our resemblance to each other is strikingly similar. On many occasions, merchants and acquaintances have mistaken Gordon for me and I for him.

It was during this period that I began to discover around our apartment items not of Gordon's ownership. One afternoon I had purchased a new stereo combination with four-floor-speakers. With an extension cord or tw, I planned to place a speaker in each corner of the living room, giving us lush sound and the sense of sitting right in the very midst of a symphony orchestra.

You can imagine my shock then, when I began to turn back a corner of the carpet to secret speaker and extension cord and discovered neat ranks of currency sandwiched between the rug and its pad. Each time a half-foot of rug was pulled back, a fresh rank of bills was revealed. All in all, there were ten rows of twenty dollar bills! A nifty $4,000!

At this point I conducted a systematic search of the entire apartment. Beneath the bathroom sink, I found men's wristwatches strapped to the waterpipe. In the shoe compartment of Gordon's bowling bag, a complete Sterling silverware service for ten. In the bottom of a laundry bag in the back of a bedroom closet, a mink stole.

Which brings us to the evening of the arrest.

On the evening of Gordon's arrest? No. On the evening of my arrest.

Sunday, April 25: It was around six o'clock in the evening and I had taken dinner with Miss Ivy in her apartment.

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It was during our dessert of Brandied Lichee that I decided to call the police and inform them of Gordon's thievery. Even though I had warned him of my intentions to inform the police should his thefts not cease, they were being continued in complete disregard. It was clear to me that even now, the police were closing in on his carefully planned trail and it was only a matter of time before Gordon's discovery, apprehension and imprisonment. I would tell the police that Gordon, in a flash of conscience, was giving himself up voluntarily. And he would be given consideration for it at his trial.

But my phone call was never placed. Less than a minute after my decision, Gordon appeared at Miss Ivy's apartment in the escort of two police officers.

That's him, officers," Gordon affirmed, pointed an accusative finger in my direction. "My brother, the thief. My own brother, under whose roofs I have lived for over two years, unaware that I was breaking bread and sharing wine with a common thief! If one's own brother cannot be trusted, who in this city of thieves and charlatans can one trust?"

A small black book was extracted by one of the police officers.

"You are Alden Freer, brother of Gordon Freer?"

"Yes, I am."

"Alden Freer, you are under arrest for suspicion of burglary. You have the right to remain silent and you have the right to retain counsel. If you wave the right to remain silent, anything you say may be used in evidence against you in a court of law. Do you understand these rights as they have been explained to you?"

I said I did, as I stared directly at Gordon's immaculate necktie knot. He knew only too well what that look meant.

The four of us returned to our own apartment, where Gordon conducted the officers on a hasty tour, being careful to keep one of them between us at all times.

"The money is under the rug there. In the northwest corner."

"Pull it back."

Gordon obliged and I noted that where there had been ten rows of twenty dollar bills, there now were only five. A cool saving to Gordon of $2,000! He went on:

". . .and I found wrist watches under the bathroom sink, a mink coat in the laundry bag in the bedroom. . .and. . ."

"Gordon, there isn't any doubt that I can establish ironclad alibis for the evenings

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these robberies took place. Are you able to do the same?"

"Well, I think I can prove I was with you in those nights, dear brother. And if you are innocent, that can only mean that our apartment has been used as a drop!"

"Gordon, do you really believe our apartment was used as a place for illegal stash?"

He only smiled.

"Gordon, I suppose you were careful to wipe your fingerprints from the goodies."

"Fingerprints?"

"And, of course, found some way to apply my own. That will all come out when the police begin taking a closer look, you know."

"Fingerprints?"

"You didn't. Ahh, Gordon. Such a gross error."

"Fingerprints?" he reiterated, slightly dazed.

He wasn't smiling when the police led him away.

Monday, April 26: Exemplary behavior shaved Gordon's twenty-year prison sentence to seven. He returned thinner, paler and compliant, with one battered suitcase and one plain suit. And one bleeding, larcenous heart. He knew my key weakness and he exploited it. A brother was still a brother, that was my weakness. I agreed reluctantly to let him stay under he got his bearings.

That was the year I accepted a position with Macy's, in its Men's Accessories Department. It was the same year my eyes fell upon Gigi Schwartz.

She was everything for which a batchelor dreams. She had an almond-shaped face framed in cascading curtains of blonde hair. And because she worked in cosmetics at the same emporium, she knew which enticements to apply to that face to make a man want to sink into it beyond all propriety and reason. She was not a woman of soaring intelligence. She was neither wit nor voracious reader, nor a cook to rival the talents of Miss Ivy.

She once began a thickly dubious novel titled *Cajon: Memoirs of a Slave* and that her favorite and best recipe was a dish called Freaky Beef Stew. In the face of love, some shortcomings can be overlooked.

Meanwhile, Gordon was still descending upon the unemployment office once each week, filling his days with cartoon shows on television and an all-out effort to turn the apartment into New York's only elevated garbage dump.

But he was absent from the apartment often enough to

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make living there for me tolerable. During these absences I would invite Gigi Schwartz over for homecooked Chinese dinner, tea and saki. The recipes had been given to me by Miss Ivy and for a time, I felt some guilt about using them to entertain another woman. But I was ever so gradually terminating my relationship with Miss Ivy, a termination which took four weeks. She showed no animosity toward me for it, except to warm me never to use her friendship again to reserve tapes and records at the public library.

During this period, Gordon hit a fifty-to-one horse-racing bet at Aqueduct on what I think he said were four, five-dollar win-tickets. The following week he hit what is known as a twin-double at Roosevelt Raceway. About horse-racing I know absolutely nothing, but I gathered that this stroke of fortune was considerable, since Gordon was no longer coming to me for money.

In celebration of these events, Gordon even bought me the $3.85 *Bouillabaisse Marseillaise* at the Fisherman's Net on Third Avenue. That dish, if you have not already linguistically deciphered it, is fish stew. But in defense of Gordon, it also should be mentioned that he

opted for a five dollar bottle of white wine. Domestic.

During this period of alternating indolence and long-shots, it should be submitted that Gordon engaged in no criminal activity, except the crime of overstaying his welcome. But he was useful around the apartment. He cleaned occasionally and did the shopping. And, of course, he was also charged with the care, feeding and exercising of Cory.

Of the latter, he was miserably derelict. Each morning at ten he was to take Cory to Bryant Park for a romp. After two weeks I went to Mishkin for feedback.

"If he's walking that dog every morning, then it's gotta be the greatest disappearing act since Lamont Cranston and The Shadow. That dog's been away from the park so long now he probably wouldn't know a squirrel if it jumped up on the bridge of his nose and introduced hisself."

I asked Mishkin for suggestions.

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"Tell you what I'll do, Mr. Freer. You been a tenant here at the Hellingforth over twenty years now and that entitles you to special consideration. I'll make you one of those doggie doors. Two of them. One upstairs and one in the front door of the building. How tall is the dog?"

I shut my eyes slightly. "Nearly two feet."

Mishkin shook his head. "That's a big damn dog. But I'll do it. I can work out a lock system for the one in the lobby so's we don't get hit by any midget bandits. Like I say, Mr. Freer, you got tenure here and that calls for special consideration, especially with a brother like the one you got. No offense, Mr. Freer."

Yes, I can hear you submitting already that none of these crimes against me was so heinous that I would be driven to consider murder as retaliation. Then Gordon must have perpetrated some greater crime against me, must have placed across the camel's back some final straw which broke it.

Indeed he did. Yes, Gordon's murder is being considered because he stole from me my most precious possession. He stole from me Miss Gigi Schwartz.

He wormed his way into her life as deftly and swiftly as a worm works its way to the core of a soft, Gravenstein apple.

On the evening of another of my dinner dates with Miss Schwarts, Gordon was malingering around the apartment. His own date with a Miss Hadley on the second floor had fallen through. He knew Gigi Schwartz was coming to dinner and it was easy to see he had designs on an introduction.

He loitered in the kitchen as I dried vegetables and bamboo shoots for Muk-Hsu, readied cabbage and crab for Tientsin Cabbage with Crabmeat, prepared frog legs for stuffing with ham and garlic sauce.

"What's she like, Alden?"

"A bit like Miss Ivy. But much taller."

"That Ivy chick is five-seven."

"Who but the superficial notice superficialities in a woman?" I said.

"That's a tall broad, all right. What's she look like?"

"She has a face of some character and attraction. The operation, she tells me, did wonders."

Gordon recoiled slightly. "Operation? What operation?"

"The one to which she submitted after the accident."

"Accident?"

"Automobile collision. Head-on. She wasn't wearing her seat belt."

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But I wasn't scaring him off to a movie. I could tell he was trying to see through me. And that he wasn't going to leave without at least getting a peek at the merchandise.

"Plenty of food there for two, it looks like."

"Miss Schwartz is a sturdy eater. You have to be if you play amateur basketball and wrestle A.A.U."

Perhaps I was laying it on too heavy. Because Gordon wasn't at all convinced I'd be dining with the mutation I'd described.

He began searching out silverware. "Just set the table for you before I go. Just a helping hand."

I never should have left the kitchen, but I did, to call Gigi Schwartz to learn what time she was arriving. When I returned, Gordon was stuffing frogs legs and drying *extra* vegetables and bamboo shoots.

"You got enough here for three people. I'll probably end up eating in some diner on the West Side. A tough steak, greasy coffee and Sonny James records on the jukebox."

"All right, you can stay for dinner, but right after it, I want you out of here like a fast jet. Understood?"

"Alden, you're a real brother. Believe me, I'll serve myself last and I won't hog the conversation. I'll even make the tea, pour the saki and clean up afterwards."

One by one, Gordon broke each of these promises. He served himself second after serving Gigi, he consumed the conversation like a man speaking his dying words, and the only time he took his hungry eyes from Gigi Schwartz was when he poured the tea and saki, hers dutifully and daintily, mine with pre-occupied overspill.

But it was his final broken promise that really cut it when he mentioned the play.

"Alden tells me you two are off to see this new off-Broadway smash, *The Great Con Edison Monster and How the People Came to Destroy It.* I haven't seen a play in years."

I think it was Gordon's hang-dog look that made the compassion sparkle wetly in Gigi Schwartz's eyes. Gordon does just about the most devastating hang-dog look outside of the canine world I've ever seen.

"Well then why don't you join us, Gordon? I'm sure it will be all right with Alden. Won't it Alden?"

"Just love it," I said as I swallowed my rage. "Unfortunately he doesn't have a ticket."

Gordon showed his perfect

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teeth. No cavities, I swear. And not a single filling inside his entire face. "Oh, they always have tickets at the box office for those off-Broadway things. You wouldn't mind if I tagged along, would you, Alden? I mean, I'd just sit around here all night, staring at four walls, wallowing in my lonesomeness, drowning in my self-pity. ..."

"Of course we wouldn't mind," Gigi said. "We have time for one more cup of saki before we leave for the theater. Alden, would you pour?"

Thereafter my relationship with Gigi Schwartz went from warm to cool to cold in very short order. And I think it was about at that point that I began toying with the idea of murder. You are now, brought up to date.

Monday Evening, April 26: I returned home from work this afternoon to find the apartment very lived in. Clothing strewn about the living room, the television set on and tuned to *Secret Storm*, and the sounds of activity coming from the kitchen. Unmistakably, Gordon, the wandering brother, was home.

Gordon was in the process of piling a triple decker sandwich. The drain board looked like the aftermath of two produce trucks colliding.

I tried to be cordial. "You're missing the last half of *Secret Storm.*"

"Oh. Hi, Alden. It isn't my favorite show. I just turned it on so I wouldn't miss Cartoon Carnival at five o'clock. I always watch those old Bugs Bunny and Sylvester the Cat flicks. They crack me up one side and down the other."

"Where have you been over the weekend?" I asked.

Gordon added the last of the Swiss cheese and the last of a two-day-old loaf of French bread. I bought it fresh on Saturday at A La Duchesse Anne on Madison. It was clear he'd been packing it, and the cheese and lunch meat, in all day.

"Tasting the Big Apple, Alden," he said as he took a pre-emptory bite of his sandwich, catsup squirting out and down his stolen CCYN sweatshirt. He always uses that phrase to explain that he's been out on the town. Tasting the Big Apple. Very hip.

"You going to clean up your mess," I said, "or enter it in the *Good Housekeeping's* Kitchens Ugly Contest?"

"Relax, Alden. I'll clean it up. And I got to tell you it may not be too long before you got this whole place to yourself."

That was quite a shocker. Gordon, after all these years of

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thievery and deceit and mooching, was about to change his quarters?

"You mean you've found a place of your own?" I said anxiously.

"Yeah, I think I have, Alden. As a matter of fact, I'm moving into a little place Friday over on 68th Street. The Dutch House."

The Dutch House. At once my heart fell apart at its seams. The Dutch House was where Gigi Schwartz lived.

"Isn't that where—"

"—where Gigi pads, right," Gordon said, wiping horseradish and mustard from his chin. "I'm going to move in with her, see how it works out, you know? Real sweet kid, that Gigi. I got to thank you, Alden, for introducing me to her."

"Don't mention it," I replied. Though my voice wasn't in it. I should have been please about finally getting rid of Gordon. But I wasn't. Not at all. Not this way.

"Cheer up. There'll be plenty of chicks for you. This Big Apple is full of them, ripe ones low on the tree waiting to be picked. You just hang in there around the old trunk. You'll snatch a juicy one down that's meant for you."

To this point I had been fearful of going through with my plans to murder Gordon. I had the bomb in my attache case in the bedroom and I had a tentative plan, but I still doubted whether I could actually go through with it. But now, I needed no finer reason to murder Gordon that the one with which I was now presented. He had not only stolen the woman I loved, he was now moving in with her, with horseradish and catsup on his crummy stolen CCNY sweatshirt and no goodbye or thanks-a-lot on his lips.

Tuesday, April 27: This final note, before I drop off to sleep. I have tentatively scheduled Gordon's death for Thursday. It is a good target date, allowing me two full days—Tuesday and Wednesday—in which to determine the routines of fifth and sixth floor tenants. Beyond the wall of my room I can hear Gordon banging and clanging around packing some of his things. Not much in our place is his so it shouldn't take him long. The racket does not offend me and it shouldn't take me long to drop off. Instead of sheep-counting, I shall count one by one, tenants as they leave the building on Thursday morning. And I shall count Gordon, as well, sleeping 'til noon with a bomb beneath his bed.

Following my usual routine,

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I left the apartment at 8:10 for work, but instead of heading for work, I crossed the street to Bryant Park where, from a bench some one hundred yards away, I could observe the routines of my fellow tenants.

I there observed Miss Ivy emerge from the building at 8:12 a.m. on her way to the library. I am not too concerned for the danger of Miss Ivy being caught in her rooms when the blast rips through the sixth floor. She is a punctual, dedicated woman of stout health who has not missed a day of work in thirteen years.

At 8:33, Mr. and Mrs. Barbetta were seen leaving for their respective jobs in Greenwich Village. There is no reason to feel their routine will not be the same on the day of the bombing.

At 8:45 Mr. Robert Owens of Apt. 501 emerged with a battered valise in hand. I suspect he is a scholar or professor bound for work. His habits and his daytime obligations still doubtful.

Leaving the building at 9:45 was Mr. Bennet in Apt. 602. About his routine there is no doubt. He returns from his job as a mechanic at J.F.K. International at 12:50 a.m. and goes immediately to bed. He wakes punctually at eight a.m. every morning and walks to The Pancake Hut six blocks away from his breakfast. He seldom returns before noon and never before ten-thirty.

At ten o'clock precisely, Cory, a St. Bernard dog, burst through the ingeniously devised trap door of the Hellingforth. Across Sixth Avenue he bounds, a huge, red monstrosity gone wild. Spotting me here in the park and not away at work caused the big, baleful eyes to stare up at me in perplexion. And then, as quickly as he had discovered me sitting there alone and adding to my journal, he bids me good-by as a bushy squirrel is spotted in his field of vision. Cory is a maniac about squirrels. He finds in them the same carnal fascination that a cat finds in a mouse.

Perhaps it is because we are both predators that I recall another morsel of habit in Gordon's life. And it is a juicy morsel because it further seals his impending death against possible escape. It is just this. On many occasions Gordon does not even return to the apartment the next morning after an evening on the town. Except on Wednesday nights. On Wednesday nights Gigi Schwartz attends a seminar at a cosmetics clinic and then drives to Long Island for dinner with a sister, to remain overnight. Gordon always spends this

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night in, gaping at a lengthy string of Busby Berkley musicals and James Gagney gangster films on television's Classic Flicks. Which means he will be sleeping late. His circumstances surrounding his death are building nicely. Habit and sloth will be his murderers.

Wednesday, April 28: My second day of surveillance in Bryant Park. Again the morning routine of each mentioned tenant is followed faithfully. With one exception, Mr. Bennett returned forty minutes early from his breakfast, at 10:22. This deviation from the norm will constrict my timetable a bit, but not so much that my plan must be scrubbed. At ten sharply, Cory appears on the stoop of the Hellingforth for his squirrel hunt in the park. And at 10:22 Mr. Bennett returns from his breakfast. So the timing for the detonation of tomorrow's blast is clear. It must occur between 10:01 and 10:20.

In the matter of Mr. Robert Owens, it has been determined that he is a professor of Geological Science at New York University, returning to his rooms at the Hellingforth no earlier than six-thirty in the evening.

There remains now only two final matters: the security of

the sixth floor storage room and Mishkin's fifth floor workshop. No one must be in those rooms when the bomb explodes.

In the case of the first, I repaired to my apartment and there typed notes addressed to all the tenants in the building who do not work during the daytime hours.

On Thursday morning, between 10 and 11, City Engineers will be in your building for the purpose of maintenance repairs on heating and plumbing equipment in the sixth floor unit designating as the storage room. Your

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abstension from using this facility during this brief period on Thursday, April 28th will be appreciated. (SIGNED) Department of Engineers, City of New York.

Concerning the matter of the workshop I visited Mr. Mishkin.

"Mr. Mishkin, on Thursday morning between ten and eleven, I'm planning to tape record a radio presentation of Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 1*, as well as the New York Chamber Soloists performance of Handel's Oboe Concertos."

"That's very nice, Mr. Freer. I think we should all strive to put class in our lives. This city, it's nothin' but a concrete jungle full of animals, you know what I mean? Brutes and animals."

"But you see, Mr. Mishkin, in order to record, I require something like complete silence."

"Of course you need silence! I know about tape recording! Most important thing for your recording on tape is silence. So is there gonna be a train wreck in the building tomorrow or something?"

"The workshop, Mr. Mishkin. As you know it is situated directly opposite the wall of my apartment."

"You want I should make myself scarce in there tomorrow between ten and eleven, right?"

"If you would."

"No problem, Mr. Freer. Early in the morning, me and the missus is going to visit her sister in New Rochelle. Be there all day. . .if she don't start up with me about success and being a crummy super all my life and. . ."

"Thank you, Mr. Mishkin."

Wednesday afternoon: I spent these hours at the store, working to diminish my anxiety and tension. At four o'clock, Mr. Dalrymple, my supervisor requested my presence in his office for a discussion of my tardinesses of the past three days.

"Not all all like you, Freer. Over seven years service and now suddenly we find—lapses, Freer."

"I haven't been feeling at all well these past few days, Mr. Dalrymple."

"Flu? Stomach disorder? We have our first Spring sales coming up next week and anything less than a full crew will mean an inefficient ship. You take Thursday and Friday off, Freer. Round yourself back into shape. We'll compute it off your regular vacation time, of course."

I affected sickliness and

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contribution. "Yes, sir. That might be the best thing to do, sir."

"See a doctor, Freer. We'll be monitored by some regional reps during our sales days and a poor showing could be dynamite."

I smiled wanly. Dynamite. An apt phrase.

Wednesday, Evening: While Gordon was out, I liquidated. To a female U.N. interpreter living on 58th Street, I sold my stereo, speakers and phonograph records. To a commercial artist in the Village, I sold my decorator couch and arm chair. He told me he had an idea to suspend them on wire from the side of the Allied Chemical Building as part of an ad campaign. I would be traveling light.

When Gordon returned to the apartment and remarked about the skimpy living room furnishings I explained that the recording equipment was out for repairs and that I was having the couch and chair dyed orange on a whim.

Wednesday, Midnight: As expected, Gordon attended his weekly living room film festival. Alone in the bedroom, I got out my bomb, set the timer and activated it for an explosion at 10:05 a.m. I then slipped quietly into Gordon's room and slipped the old attache case beneath his bed and as I did, checked his alarm clock to make sure he was planning to arise at his usual hour. As I read the lighted dial, my heart stirred with anticipatory triumph. The clock was set for twelve noon. Dobie Gillis would have been proud of Gordon's slothful regularity. Perhaps they might even meet and take it under discussion in the next world.

Thursday, Morning, April 28: At seven I tip-toed out of the apartment, down the stairs and out a side door of the Hellingforth. Two suitcases and a single diary in which would be recorded one final entry: My witnessing of the blast itself from the bench in Bryant Park. Goodbye Macy's, I whispered beneath my breath as I made my way for the Mecca All Night Cafeteria five blocks toward the Hudson River. Good-bye, old and faithful sports car, as I made my way past its battered form parked at the curb. Goodbye, Hellingforth, as I acknowledged its ancient brickwork and timeless ivy. And good-bye, New York City, town of infinite pleasures and depthless pains. Good-bye all.

Thursday Morning—Eight

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o'clock: I have returned from my hasty breakfast and am writing this as I sit on my park bench and wait for the exodus of the innocent. My mind's eye sees sticks of dynamite lying in perfect repose beneath Gordon, who sleeps on his back with his hands folded across his chest. There is something funereally beautiful in that.

Out they come in perfect, timely order. At 8:12, Miss Ivy bound on birdy legs for the library. At 8:33, the Barbetta's headed for Greenwich Village and at 8:45, Mr. Owens for his lecture classes at N.Y.U. Shortly before nine, the Mishkins emerge for their trip to New Rochelle and at 9:30 Mr. Bennett for his after-slumber breakfast.

The tenants left behind have received their messages from the City Engineering Department to refrain from using the storage room; and Mishkin's workshop is vacant and locked. All things are progressing in impeccable order.

There is left now a single occupant to disembark the ship of immovable concrete and ivy across the street: a shaggy, spiritted, lovable St. Bernard dog of uncertain parentage.

While I wait for the safe exit of the last innocent bystander I here reflect on those years of companionship and friendship. I write of Cory's faithfulness when weather was inclement and foul or when I was ill abed and he would pad the city with a tiny basket afix beneath his chin to fetch medicine or food. I write of the times he routed burglars from the building and I write of the many occasions when he sped after me carrying in his jaws a forgotten scarf or hat or briefcase. I write, too, of his companionship on lonely nights, and more of his kindnesses which in this hour of trouble and impending disaster have escaped my mind.

In the pocket of my topcoat is his leash, with which he shall be secured to a leg of my park bench. I long to take him with me but a man on the run from such a heinous crime as I am about to commit has no use for excess baggage, no matter how personal the attachment to it has become. Someone will find him a good home and a loving master.

It is now 10:02 three minutes until the explosive execution of a wicked, thoughtless brother. It disturbs me that Cory is two minutes late coming through Mishkin's trap door. Always his impetuous race to the park has been Pavlovian in its punctuality.

The time has proceeded to 10:03 and still Cory has not emerged from the building.

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Something is delaying him and I see now, the solitary flaw in my plan. Depending on an animal's sense of punctuality, I have not allowed time to disarm my bomb should that punctuality lapse. There will be no time now to return to the apartment and disarm the bomb. If, in the next thirty seconds Cory does not appear, he shall die an ignorant, innocent death!,

It is now 10:04, sixty seconds from the blast. I put my face in my hands and pray, intermittently writing these final few words. To live, it is imperative that Cory now be pounding down the stairs from the impending holocaust on the sixth floor. And out Mishkin's trap door in the lobby. And across the street to the safety of Bryant Park, to lick my hand a fond goodbye and then to wonder as I leash him to the bench.

Writing, I have now raised my head from my prayers. The second hand on my watch sweeps through the final minute of silence before the morning is torn apart by an explosion.

And then I see him as he comes bounding up to me across the grass. He's made it out of the building! Cory has made it safely away!

A big, oval friendly face with a mouth as wide as the Sea Lion Caves of Oregon. My hand is covered with wet, sloppy kisses and then like a red missile he is off and away after a plump squirrel.

There are left just fifteen seconds, time enough to write these final words in my diary. There is, alas, no time to run. There is only time hurriedly to write the epitaph of a man who for the briefest time, enjoyed the exhilaration of the possibility of turning the perfect murder.

But it is not to be. For Cory, faithful Cory, has seen fit to bring me an item of which I am always forgetful.

It is at my feet, silently whirring off seconds inside. It is my atta. . . .

Next Month:

THE LEGEND

A New Exciting Story

by CLAYTON MATTHEWS

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GREATER HARTFORD AND QUEENS

by FRANK SISK

Faceless, alone, he waited on the rim of hell. For he knew, only too well, that for a man who has betrayed the Mafia there can be no tomorrow—only slow, cruel death in the night.

THEY SAID they would give him immunity in exchange for his testimony at the trial of Herman Ventura.

"Immunity from what?" Steinbach asked.

"Immunity from prosecution," they said, the U.S. attorney named Esmond doing most of the talking.

"That won't buy me much time," he said.

"We've got enough on you right now, Sol, to salt you down for a good ten years."

"Sure you have. That's not the kind of time I'm referring to."

"We'll give you protection around the clock."

"For how many years?"

"Until we feel you're fairly safe," Esmond said.

"If I sing, I'll never be safe, Mister Esmond. You know that as well as I do."

"Is that your last word, Sol?"

"I sure hope not."

Esmond's heavy eyebrows lowered in iron-gray menace as he turned to the deputy U. S. marshal. "Take him back where he came from, George. And throw the key away."

They let him stew in a cell for a week without exercise and then they had him out again for an airing.

Esmond was sitting at his big desk reading a newspaper. His assistant, a frowzy-haired pipsqueak called Herbert O'Hara, was drawn up to his full height of five feet three before a window, as if on the verge of addressing a jury. Also present was a man new to Sol

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Steinbach, a tall wiry-looking man with a long sallow face and black patent-leather hair parted in the middle. He was sitting on the edge of the conference table.

"How are you feeling this morning, Sol?" O'Hara asked.

"Like seven days in Vegas with none of the fun," he said.

"Meaning exactly what?"

"Meaning his throat's dry and raw from too many cigarettes," Esmond said, glancing up from the newspaper.

"Right," Steinbach said.

"Meaning he hasn't been sleeping any too well," Esmond continued. "Look at those red eyes, Herb."

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"Now that you mention it," O'Hara said.

"Peckish appetite. Am I right, Sol?"

"The menu'll never win any blue ribbons," Steinbach said curtly.

"Nerves edgy. Notice how he keeps rubbing his fingers together."

"All right already. I plead guilty."

"And I bet you're constipated too."

Steinbach kept silent, trying not to fidget.

"The Vegas syndrome, Herb," Esmond said, smiling his mean smile. "Classic example."

Sol Steinbach found his fingers playing with a button of his shirt. He willed them to stop. The sallow-faced man was watching him like a bird of prey.

"Well, to change the subject," O'Hara said, gliding slowly away from the window, "your playmates are showing a profound interest in you. Just an hour ago Harold Fitzroy, the great mouthpiece, was nosing around on the matter of bail."

"How about that? What is my bail anyhow?"

Moving along the wall as if pacing out the dimensions of the room, O'Hara said, "There is no bail."

"No bail? How come?"

"Fitzroy asked the same question in about the same tone of voice," Esmond said.

"We told him we were holding you as a material witness," O'Hara said from somewhere behind him. "Incommunicado, for your own safety."

Fear began to gather in his belly like nausea. "You can't do that, man. It's against the law."

"Don't make me laugh, Sol," Esmond said, far from laughing. "We're already doing it."

"I got certain rights. Fitz will get a writ of habeas corpus or something and spring me. Sure he will."

"Very likely," Esmond said.

"Good, good."

"Maybe not so good," O'Hara said, coming to a stop at the wall opposite the window from where he'd started. "Mull it over a little, Sol."

"What's to mull?"

"You're not a blood brother," Esmond said, carefully folding the newspaper. "You're not a soldier in the Scarpino family. All you are is a useful associate, a bookkeeper retained through the sufferance of Herman Ventura."

"So I do a little work for Herman."

"You do a lot of work for Herman. You have facts and figures on his loan-sharking operation right at your fingertips, facts and figures that

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Herman himself would have to check out with you before he passed on Scarpino's cut."

"I don't admit any of this," Steinbach said. "Not an iota."

"Not yet."

"Not ever."

"You're no clam, Sol. You talk in your sleep. It's common knowledge."

"Who says?"

"Ventura says. One-eye Ollie says. A lot of mugs say. You're kind of a computer brain, Sol, but you've got the sort of spine that makes you wobble when you walk."

"That's your opinion."

"I have another opinion too," Esmond said. "Twelve hours after you leave our custody, Sol, I think you'll be a dead man."

"You bastards are trying to connive me into a corner."

"It's just part of our job," O'Hara said, on the slow move again. "One of the pleasant parts."

"Let's say Fitzroy produces a writ to get you back on the street," Esmond said. "Within an hour after you wave us good-by, I plan to obtain a warrant charging you as co-conspirator in the Kessell Construction Company case. Ventura will be named as another conspirator along with One-eye Ollie. Ventura and Ollie will also be designated as defendants. But not you, Sol. You'll just be a co-conspirator. I'll explain the subtle differences in some detail to the press. And Fitzroy, I am sure, will explain it all to Ventura."

Feeling suddenly nauseous and cold, Sol Steinbach said, "You gents are signing my death warrant. You realize that, don't you?"

"I know nothing of the kind," Esmond said stiffly.

"I'm dead."

"Not if you cooperate."

"I'm dead no matter which way I go."

"Not at all, Sol. Meet Mister Woolstock. He's in the Justice Department, all the way up here from Washington. "Esmond turned toward the man lounging on the edge of the conference table. John, say hello to Sol Steinbach. He's got to be our ace in the hole."

"Welcome to the fold," Woolstock said, not bothering to rise.

"Oh, Jesus!" Steinbach said.

"Have you ever heard of the Organized Crime Act?" Woolstock asked quietly.

Sol Steinbach shook his head.

"Congress enacted it on the fifteenth of October, nineteen-seventy. It's quite a nice piece of legislation. Gives the Strike Force a lot of leeway in protecting reliable informers

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and witnesses against retribution from the fat cats."

"I bet," Steinbach said.

"Under the provisions of the Act," Woolstock went on amiably, "we are permitted to give a man like you a complete new identity, from birth certificate, social security number and name. We are also empowered to give you money for a new start, to set you up in another part of the country, to underwrite plastic surgery if you so desire, and to aid you in obtaining employment compatible with your past training. What do you think of that?"

"It sounds strictly from Siberia."

"There is the debit side," Woolstock said, lighting a cigarette. "Once the step is taken, you are effectively fenced off from the past. Many old patterns of life must be abandoned. The same with certain old habits, certain old friends. But when you consider that old friends may become dangerous enemies, you will perceive the credit side of the ledger."

"You talk like a lawyer," Sol Steinbach said.

"I have the degree but I don't practise."

"Well?" Esmond said impatiently.

"I got to give this some thought. A lot of thought."

"Return him to the think tank," Esmond directed the deputy.

SOL STEINBACH sat and thought for three hours. Then he was taken back up to Esmond's office. O'Hara was holding the fort alone, a smug grin on his elfin face. He began tapping a yellow pencil against the edge of the desk in time to his words.

"The great mouthpiece has done his work well, Sol. You are now a free man. Under a measly one-thousand-dollar bond. Good-by and good luck."

"I'm not leaving."

"Why not, Sol?"

"I want to live a little longer."

"That's what I call being smart," O'Hara said, pushing a sheet of printed paper across the desk. "Just sign your name there."

"What's it all about?"

"It declares you have volunteered to testify in behalf of the United States in the trial of Herman Ventura and Oliver One-eye Pace. It also commits you to the protective custody of John Woolstock and his staff."

Events began to move swiftly after that. Esmond returned to the office as if summoned by O'Hara's thought waves. Woolstock entered a few

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minutes later, accompanied by an attractive blonde who was carrying several shorthand pads and a handful of sharpened pencils.

"Marie, make yourself comfortable in that leather chair," Woolstock said. "Are you ready, Sol?"

He nodded mournfully.

"Fine, fine. Let's start with the shylocking records. Where do they keep them?"

The blonde was taking it down.

"There in Ventura's produce-company office."

"Truck Garden Distribution?"

"That's the place."

"We figured as much, Sol. We've even got a key to the back door. And we've been nosing around there at night on three occasions without finding what we want."

"You been looking too hard."

"Obviously. One of our specialists opened the safe. Nothing there but money. Lots of it."

"Did you notice the telephone books?"

"Stacks of them."

"This year we're keeping our records in the Greater Hartford directory."

"Please elucidate, Sol."

"If you'll pass me any directory you've got handy."

O'Hara complied.

Smiling faintly, Sol opened the book in his lap. "This little system I worked out myself. Ventura gave me a nice bonus. Now if the young lady will lend me one of her pencils."

The blonde handed one over.

"Since Kessell Construction is uppermost, I could use that as an example, if you don't mind."

"Perfect," Woolstock said.

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"We go to the beginning of the K listings," Sol said, going to it with several page flips. "KAB Enterprises happens to be the first listing here. So I take this pencil and place a dot under the K, under the E and under each S. Then I go to the next entry. K L M Royal Dutch Airlines. I place a dot under the E. Now I'm looking for an L, so the next entry is no good. The one after that won't work either. Here we are. Kabel's Luggage Shop. A pencil dot under the L in Kabel and another under the L in Luggage. You see what I've done, I guess."

"You've spelled Kessell," Woolstock said.

"Right. That identifies the borrower. Kessell. For our type of non-audit bookkeeping it gives us all the dope we need. Better than a D and B rating."

"Simple and ingenious. Proceed, Sol."

"I forgot to say we use a black pencil on that. Now we take a green pencil and use it the same way on the street addresses under the K listings. This way we establish transaction dates. With the Kessell brothers, they borrowed a hundred big ones on April two of nineteen seventy-one. I remember this date because it just missed April Fools Day."

"Apt," Woolstock said.

Sol turned his attention back on the directory in his lap. "Our shorthand for that date was *Ap sec sev one*. The first address listed is Windroof Hill Rd. Won't do. Next is American Row, so we make a green dot under the A. Then we drop down to the next address—no go—and the next—no—and, yes, Phelps Dr. We dot the P and S, giving us so far *Ap* and *s*. Next we drop down to—"

"We understand," Woolstock said patiently. "Go to the next step, Sol."

"The amounts of money. Okay. For this we use a red pencil." He again consulted the directory in his lap. "And the phone numbers of course."

"Of course," Woolstock said, speaking directly to Esmond and O'Hara. "Let's get a search warrant immediately, Jim. We know what we're looking for now."

Esmond said to O'Hara, "Go over and see Judge Rodner."

As O'Hara hurried from the office, Woolstock's gaze returned to Sol's. "Many of the questions we're about to ask you are already answered in our files, Sol. Much of this material, however, is inadmissible as evidence on its own merits for one legal reason or another."

"Sure. I know. Wiretaps. Bugs."

"Not just wiretaps, Sol.

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Peter Kessell spilled a lot of beans. But his brother Paul refuses to say a word. He's afraid."

"Don't blame him much."

"We need a reliable witness to back up Peter's testimony. You follow me?"

"I seem to be following you straight to hell, counselor."

"It's not going to be as bad as that, I assure you. Let's begin with the vigorish, Sol. What's the vig on a Ventura loan?"

"It varies. Small loans come high and very short term. Big ones not quite so high, with longer terms."

"Let's focus on Kessell Construction."

"Five per cent."

"Weekly?"

"What else? Ventura is not your friendly banker."

Woolstock looked across at Esmond. "In case you've never stopped to figure this out, Jim, and in order that Marie may take it down for the record, the Kessells borrow a hundred thousand dollars from Public Opportunities Corporation, an alleged real-estate appraisal outfit, whose executive officer is One-eye Pace, a muscle man pure and simple, who wouldn't know a title deed from a cornerstone. He's just a front for Ventura. But on the face of all public records, Ventura has no connection with Public Opportunities. He's in another business altogether, namely wholesale produce, which he is operating legitimately by the way but at a margin of profit that is microscopic.

"Ventura's legitimate company is heavily mortgaged to the Shippers Bank and Trust Company, which holds a legal charter from the State Banking Commission and whose president is one Harvey L. Davenport.

"Now who is Harvey L. Davenport? He's a well-educated business man who happens to be married to Guido Scarpino's oldest daughter. Which means Davenport is a front for Scarpino, even as Ventura is an apparent front for Davenport. But you can be sure that Scarpino is not on the board of directors of Shippers Bank. Still he is well enough represented to control it. I won't go into the complex relationships right now.

"Let me get back to the Kessell loan."

"First, John," Esmond said, "fill me in on how the Kessels found Public Opportunities—one hell of a sardonic name, isn't it?—or how Public Opportunities found the Kessells."

"All right." Woolstock winked kindly at Sol Steinbach, "As I bumble along, will you be good enough to correct any

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misstatements I make at once."

"You can count on it," Steinbach said.

"A few months before the Kessell Construction Company negotiated the shylock loan with Public Opportunities Corporation, it was in sound financial shape. It was operated as a partnership by Peter and Paul Kessell. They were building homes for the so-called lower middle class on suburban tracts, the look-alike commuter domicile. They were having no trouble in obtaining financing through normal banking channels.

"Then, one fine day, they were offered an opportunity to build a good-sized condominium, something that would finish off at just under two million, yielding the Kessells not only a fair profit but a lot of prestige in the local construction field. There was just one hitch. The condominium developer required that they deposit in escrow one hundred thousand dollars as engagement to satisfactory performance of the contract.

"At this stage, though, Kessell Construction had more homes in the process of building than usual, and their regular credit sources were for the moment tapped out. They hated to lose the condominium contract for lack of a hundred grand, particularly in face of the fact that one tract of homes would be on the market within six weeks, with plenty of liquid assets consequently available. But they needed to make their condominium commitment within a week or lose it.

"They put out feelers. A few days later, a member of the golf club the Kessells belonger to approached Paul Kessell at the bar and said that he'd heard about the big deal cooking and if there was an investment possibility he knew of an interested party. Paul Kessell told this amiable cigar-smoking club member that he and his brother worked solely as partners and never permitted a third party to enter a deal. Then he added—somewhat ruefully, I suspect—that the big deal might be no deal at all unless they could wangle some fast financing, short term, outside their regular banking connections.

"The cigar smoker mused a moment over his martini. Then he said there was a bank he often used himself. Its policies were not quite so stodgy as some of the old liners. Was Paul Kessell interested? Paul Kessell definitely was. Then try the Shippers Bank and Trust, the cigar smoker said. Mention my name if you wish. Here's my business card. It was Herman

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Ventura speaking. Am I right so far, Sol?"

"That's the M. O., counselor," Steinbach said.

"Next morning, both the Kessells presented themselves at the Shippers Bank," Woolstock continued. "They introduced themselves and handed Ventura's card to Davenport's secretary. But they did not see the president himself. They were routed instead to the vice president in charge of short-term loans, a prematurely graying man whose name is Mark Martin. Now Martin happens to be a *caporegima* or lieutenant in the Scarpino organization. Martin does not report to Davenport, he deals directly with old Guido Scarpino himself.

"Anyway, the smooth Mister Martin accepts the Kessell loan application and promises, at their insistence, to give them a decision before the close of the banking day. That afternoon he informs them by phone that, regrettably, Shippers is unable to make the loan. You see, Jim, Shippers is ostensibly an honest bank, abiding by the statutes under which it maintains its charter, but it is beautifully situated to act as a clearing house for its invisible affiliates, such as Truck Garden Distribution, Public Opportunities Corporation and dozens of other enterprises from vending machines to hotels.

"Now before Peter Kessell could be lucky enough to hang up, Martin adds confidentially that there still might be a source of money in another channel. He cautioned Peter that he was talking strictly ex curia, as it were, and preferred that his name was never mentioned in the matter. Kessell foolishly asked for the name of this new potential. Martin gave it to him: Public Opportunities. That was April Fools Day, wasn't it, Sol?"

"Nothing else."

"The day after that Oliver Pace gave the Kessell brothers one hundred thousand in hard cash in return for a promissory note drawn up by our friend here, Mister Steinbach. Tell us the terms, Sol."

"I think you already know 'em."

"I do. But I want Marie to take it right from the horse's mouth."

"Vig of five per cent. You know that. Payable in weekly instalments of one thousand nine hundred and twenty-three dollars and forty cents."

"Interest was always figured on the remaining principal."

"Of course. Like any other loan."

"What was the first week's vigorish, Sol?"

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"Your compute's as good as mine. Five grand."

Woolstock, shaking his head slowly, smiled. "So within seven days of receiving a hundred grand from One-eye, the Kessells were required to repay, interest plus principal, six thousand nine hundred and twenty-three dollars and some odd cents."

"Forty cents," Sol Steinbach said.

"A nice plain ordinary business arrangement. Tell us about the penalty clause."

"If they defaulted on a due date, the vig doubled the following week."

"You mean instead of paying five thousand interest or thereabouts, they had to pay ten?"

"Right."

"Plus the defaulted principal payment and the new principal payment?"

"Right."

"Meaning a total payment of more than thirteen thousand might be required in one week?"

"Under the penalty clause, yes. And depending how much of the principal remained on the books."

"The telephone books?"

Grinning, Steinbach nodded.

"What if the Kessells defaulted and couldn't get up the full interest and principal payment the following week? What if they could only produce, let's say, two-thirds of it—nine thousand two hundred and forty dollars instead of thirteen thousand eight hundred and forty dollars?"

"You must have pretty complete files, counselor. It happened like that."

"How many times in six months?"

"Five or six, to the best of my recollection. The phone books will tell you."

"Back to that question then, Sol. What happened to the unpaid difference?"

"It was applied to the principal."

"And began earning a five per cent vig?"

"Yeah."

JOHN WOOLSTOCK turned and addressed Esmond. "What happened here, Jim, was a total disaster to the Kessell Construction Company and its two partners. Three weeks after they borrowed the money from Public Opportunities, a wildcat carpenters' strike halted all their home building. This strike went on for two months. The Kessells had to strain hard to meet notes due at their legitimate money sources and even harder to come up with the weekly payments to Public Opportunities. Within six

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months they were bankrupt and Paul Kessell was in the hospital on the critical list."

"I was wondering when you were going to get to the meat of the case," Sol said.

"The meat of the case?" Bemused, Woolstock raised his black brows.

"Conspiracy, usury, assault and battery, maiming."

"Quite an indictment," Woolstock said. "But the United States is not interest in any of it per se. If One-eye Ollie hadn't taken Paul Kessell across a state line to collect a pound of flesh, we wouldn't have been able to hold you."

"Dumb bastard."

"Lucky for Uncle Sam."

"What have we been talking about then?"

"The Kessell case. Which is one of many. All alike in many ways, with a variety of endings, some happier, some much sadder. As you know, Sol, *all too well.*"

Woolstock found a cigarette and took his time about lighting it.

"Let's follow the Kessell case to its bitter financial end. From what Peter Kessell tells us, and which I'm sure Sol's phone books will verify, Kessell Construction over a period of six months paid to Public Opportunities the sum of one hundred and eleven thousand

dollars and still owed ninety-six thousand. Is that about right, Sol?"

"You've been peeking, counselor."

"Now let's take a look at Public Opportunities Corporation. It holds title to a couple of parking lots and that's all. So another question arises, Sol. Where did Oliver Pace obtain the money he lent Kessell Construction?"

"As if you didn't know."

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"Of course we know. But tell Marie anyway."

"He got it from us."

"Who is us?"

"Truck Garden Distribution. Herman Ventura. Who else?"

"All of Truck Gardens' corporate records indicate that it is operating a bare thread away from red ink. Now where in the world would Ventura raise a hundred grand overnight for the Kessells, not to mention all those other thousands and thousands he has out on the street right now?"

"You know that too, Mister Woolstock. It comes from Scarpino, and Scarpino gets it, as far as I know, from his gambling operations."

"Does Scarpino appear himself with a satchelful of money upon demand?"

"No, not at all. I've never seen him in person. He sends that bird you mentioned from the bank. Martino—Martin, he calls himself now."

"It's not bank money though?"

"Hell, no. The receipt is always made out to the County Grain Company. Martin tucks it in his pocket and leaves."

"Does Truck Garden ever repay County Grain?"

"Never. I guess there's no such profit. They don't tell me everything."

"I understand that, Sol. But obviously Ventura doesn't keep all the profits gleaned from this money Martin so readily turns over to him. Where does it go? Back to Martin?"

"Martin's not on the receiving end. And we keep another set of records for this. In the Queens directory under B."

"B for what?"

"B for Boss, which is what they all call Scarpino."

Woolstock looked over at Esmond, who was already reaching for the telephone. "That's right, John. Make sure the warrant includes all the directories, especially Queens." Back to Sol, he said. "Exactly what is the financial arrangement, Sol, and how is it handled?"

"Well, the principal and interest of twenty per cent must be repaid at the end of a twelve-month period. This covers each transaction and no transaction is ever less than fifty thousand dollars."

"Spell that out in a little more detail."

"All it means is that Ventura is never allowed to take less than fifty grand, even though he may have an immediate need for only ten or twenty."

"I see. Scarpino won't condescend to deal in chicken-feed, like the non-existent County Grain."

"I guess so."

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"On every hundred grand invested, Scarpino gets back within a year a hundred and twenty. Lovely. How much has he got out on the street right now, Sol? Give a guess."

"I don't have to guess. Two million one hundred and fifty."

"That's a clear profit of four hundred and thirty thousand. On that little game alone. And Ventura's doing very well too, with all that overage on his rate of interest. Five hundred or so per cent per annum."

"You add pretty well, counselor."

"Do you know how much income Scarpino declared last year on his tax return?"

"I don't want to know."

"Eighty-seven thousand."

"Cool, cool."

"Ventura declared only twenty-two thousand."

"I declared more than that."

"We know you did, Sol. You've got the makings of a good citizen. One-eye Ollie declared nothing. Not a cent."

"Figures."

"One more thing, Sol. How does Ventura get the shylock money back to Scarpino if not through Martin."

"It's placed in a safe deposit box in the Broad Street Savings Bank. I often make the deposit myself, always cash. The box is in the name of J. Livingston. After each deposit the key is mailed directly to Guido Scarpino."

Nearly a minute passed in silence. Woolstock broke it. "What do you think, Jim?"

"I think we've got the makings of a case, John," Esmond said.

SOL STEINBACH, isolated in a fairly comfortable cell, had a number of bad moments before the trial. The worst one was when a new guard tossed a folded piece of paper through the bars and moved away without a word.

Ten grand to slit your throat has been offered. And accepted. So long, rat.

Sol had the shakes until a Woolstock aide named Carlson arrived in response to his summons. The young lawyer read the typed note with a brow that grew deeper in furrows and then he arranged, within minutes, to have Sol removed from the cell in the county jail and transported secretly to a military installation.

At the trial a month later he tried, when testifying, to avoid Ventura's eyes. He somehow didn't worry too much about Scarpino because he didn't really know him at all, and besides the old man seemed pretty tired, as if surrendering to an inevitable end. But

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Ventura's smouldering gaze scorched him once without mercy.

One-eye wasn't present. He'd been tried by the State on a variety of charges and found guilty. He was now doing time.

Mark Martin hadn't been charged. The newspapers reported that no evidence had been developed to prove that he was any more than a glorified messenger boy for Scarpino. This grave misconception caused Steinbach to break out in a cold sweat.

Finally it was finished. Scarpino and Ventura were found guilty of income-tax evasion. Each was heavily fined. Scarpino drew a sentence of five to ten years, virtually life in his case. Ventura, only forty-one, got three to five.

Sol Steinbach's skin crawled.

Appeal bonds were filed.

He suffered sleeplessly at night.

Known these days as Samuel A. Schneider, Sol Steinbach lives in a small city in South Carolina. He works for the U. S. Department of Agriculture. He painstakingly maintains such reliable records on dozens of research projects involving hybrid grains and organic fertilizers that, in his four years on the job, he has earned two promotions. He recently married a retired school teacher, a year older than he is, but looking much younger.

The hair that was still a glossy black at the trial is now white as snow. His face is much thinner and heavily lined. But he is fairly healthy and reasonably happy.

When Scarpino died in prison two years ago, he seemed to feel a certain weight lifted from his shoulders. A few months later, upon reading a newspaper report that Mark Martin was considered to be Scarpino's heir apparent, he felt the weight return. A week ago, on television, he saw Ventura leaving prison. His wife inquired whether he was feeling ill. Next day, he heard that Ventura had been picked up by detectives from the district attorney's office in connection with certain revelations made by One-eye Ollie Pace. He felt a great sense of relief.

That is the way it goes nowadays with Mr. Schneider, much the same as it goes with other law-abiding citizens.

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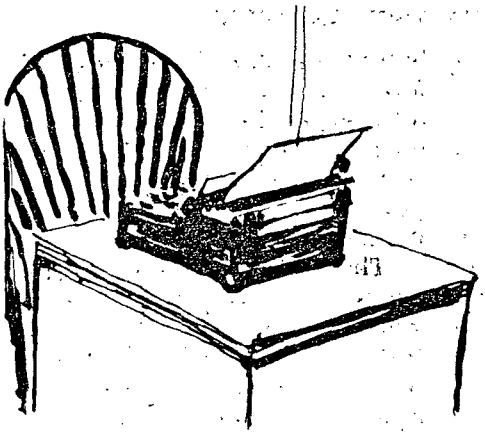

MURDER IN DUPLICATE

by

HERBERT HARRIS

From the grave her hand had come—pointing to Murder...

LAWRENCE WAYNE studied himself in the mirror of his hotel room at Brighton.

The wavy, dark wig that concealed his balding head and the mustache, carefully applied with spirit gum, looked quite real.

When he donned spectacles —an aid his strong eyesight had never needed—nobody could possibly have identified him as Lawrence Wayne.

He counted himself fortunate that he belonged to the theater. Anyone else might find it difficult—dangerous even—to acquire disguises.

It was fortunate, too, that the girl's apartment was so near Victoria Station. The train, which sped between Brighton and London in one hour, would deposit him almost on the doorstep of Joan Bowman.

He thought: An hour there, a little time to kill, an hour back—not much more than a two-hour gap in the afternoon.

"I'm spending a few hours on the bed. I don't want to be disturbed till six," he said told the young chambermaid.

It would not be Lawrence Wayne who left the hotel and returned to it some two hours later. It would be a nebulous unknown—a man with dark hair

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and moustache and spectacles.

Yet it would not be till he arrived at Corunna Court, the apartments at Vicoria, that the disguise came into its own.

He would make a point of being seen by old Rogers, the porter. More than that, he would inquire of Rogers the number of Joan Bowman's apartment.

Later, when they had found her dead, Rogers would be questioned. "Did she have any callers this afternoon?"—Well, yes, there was a man who asked where her apartment was. A chap with dark hair and moustache and glasses. . ."

Neither the cabby nor anyone on Brighton Station recognized him. They might have done so if he appeared as his true self.

One could never be too careful. Hadn't the local papers run his photo? And there were the regular patrons of the Brighton theatre, outside which his portrait appeared again. "Lawrence Wayne, actor-playwright, in his own thrilled, *Hurried Departure*, prior to London production."

He tried to read in the train, but was unable to deflect his mind from the girl he was about to destroy.

It was only a year since he had first called on her, in answer to that advertisement: "Authors' MSS typed by clean, accurate typist." She had typed that first thriller, the one that had never reached the stage. Then came *Hurried Departure*.

He had been elated when she had finished typing the latter. Taking the manuscript from her, he had known that it had the "feel" of success. Perhaps out of that elation, made more feverish by whisky, had come the beginning of the sordid affair.

Even now, some weeks after she had told him she was pregnant, Wayne re-experienced that shock, mixed with revulsion and hate, that he had felt when she broke the news.

So inconsiderate of her. So inopportune. But, then, she had known nothing of his ambitious plans.

Such plans. The founding of a little theatrical empire carrying the label of Lawrence Wayne—and unlimited capital with which to do it, thanks to the stage-struck heiress who thought Wayne was in love with her. . .

BACK IN his Brighton apartment, three hours later, he somehow felt surprisingly calm when the C.I.D. man called on him.

The eyes of Inspector Grey were darting, perceptive, unnerving, shifting from the

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dressing-room table with its confusion of grease paints to the stage costumes on the pegs and to Lawrence Wayne himself.

"Forgive the intrusion, sir" Grey said after introducing himself, "but we are making inquiries into the death of Miss Joan Bowman."

"Miss Bowman?" Wayne frowned. "She's dead?" He was glad he was an actor as well as a writer.

"She was strangled this afternoon, sir."

"It's dreadful!" Wayne exclaimed. "I knew her quite well!"

"Then you can probably help. We have the description of a man we are trying to put a name to."

"I'm afraid I don't know who her friends were," Wayne said. "You see, she just did my typing. She's been typing my plays for a year. In fact, she's nearly finished another for me."

"She had finished it, sir. Indeed, she had it all ready to post to you."

That had been a nice touch, Wayne thought—parceling the MS, addressing it to himself. It should prove, as nothing else could, that she wasn't expecting him.

"How awful," Wayne murmured sadly.

"Don't misunderstand me," Inspector Grey said, "but where were you this afternoon?"

"This afternoon?"—he expressed surprise— "Why, here, in Brighton, Inspector. I went to bed at the hotel, in fact—to refresh myself for tonight's show."

"I see." Grey nodded. There was a pause. "That's a most

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unusual ring you're wearing, sir."

"Ring?" Wayne glanced casually at the ring which he wore as a mascot. "Oh. . .yes. It belonged to my father. He brought it from Burma."

"I see that it's embossed," Inspector Grey said. "With a snake?"

"Yes," Wayne nodded, "a snake." He was half-frowning. For the first time he was feeling oddly uncomfortable.

"Like this one," the inspector added. He took from his pocket a sheet of quarto paper. Near the edge of the paper was a clear impression of a snake.

Wayne swallowed. "Where did you find this?"

"On Miss Bowman's desk," the CID man answered. "You must have leaned your knuckles on her desk when you spoke to her, Mr. Wayne. The embossing of the ring pressed against two sheets of paper with a carbon in between. It registered on the paper underneath."

Wayne had paled. "I. . .I really don't recall—"

"But you *should* recall, sir," the inspector pointed out. "It was only this afternoon. Miss Bowman had pulled the papers and the carbon out of her machine for some reason, but she'd already begun to type something and you'll see that today's date is on the top. She'd finished the manuscript and was writing a personal letter—dated today!

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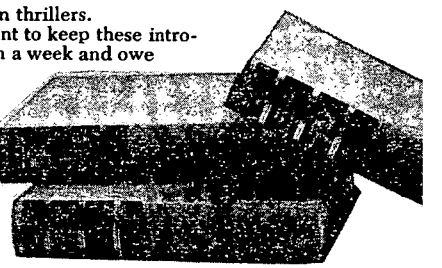

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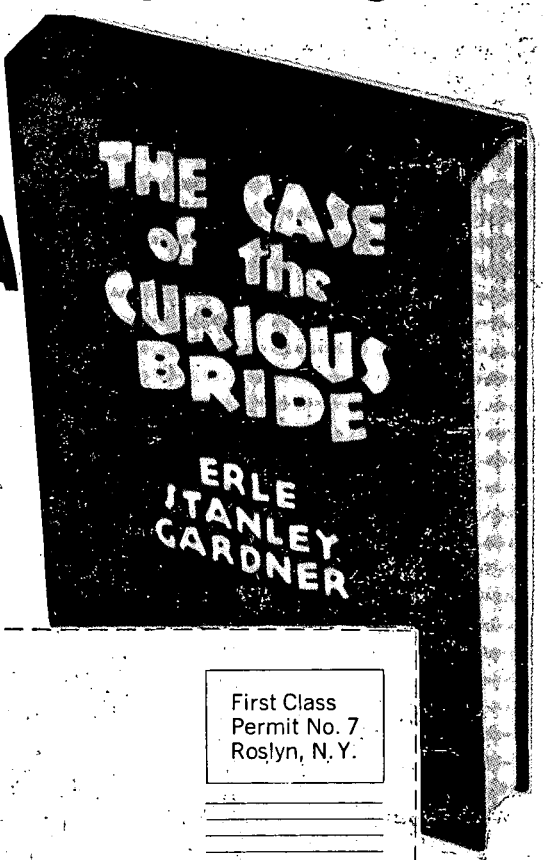

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